天地無用！魎皇鬼

夢のかたち

長谷川菜穂子

イラスト　大和田直之

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

Dreams Take Shape

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Novel 13

Machine Translated and Edited by
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Opening Poem

Swaying a thousand layers, sleeves of clouds swirling with snow,
Scattering light like flowers on the branches of the laurel,
Dreams wandering through the shadows of flowers fallen in the moon,
A garden of cherry blossom snow piling deeper than the steps of passing feet,
With no way to tell dream from waking,
Flowers raining down on a spring night,
The sleeve of a maiden gleaming in the moonlight—
How endlessly delightful.

Chapter One:

Six Months Since Tenchi Had That Strange Dream...

Six months since Tenchi had that strange dream...

The cherry blossom season had passed; fresh green leaves had come and gone, the rainy season had lifted, and the dazzling summer sunshine had blazed and faded. Now it was autumn.

"So much has happened," Tenchi murmured.

He looked up from the half-read book in his hands and gazed out the window at the rain falling silently on the garden.

Because of the rain, there was no work to be done in the fields. Tenchi, feeling an urge to spend a quiet, solitary afternoon, was doing his best impression of the old saying—plow when it's sunny, read when it rains. The book open on his desk wasn't anything highbrow—just a travel guide—but it was perfectly good for letting the mind wander while cooped up indoors.

"Hot springs, huh... We couldn't go anywhere this summer because of that whole incident. Maybe I should say something to Dad..."

That incident, of course, was when an unknown girl had suddenly shown up at the Masaki household. On a clear summer day, the day before the Obon holiday, Tenchi had been halfway down the stone steps leading from Masaki Shrine when a voice had called out "Papa!"

The girl who called herself Mayuka had turned the Masaki household upside down, and had left behind a smile burned into Tenchi's heart before she was gone. Well, not exactly gone—she was currently in Washu's lab.

A delicate, wind-chime-like sound rang out.

It wasn't a real wind chime. It was a communication terminal installed in Tenchi's room. The terminal, shaped inexplicably like a golden beetle, spread its wings with a buzzing sound and flew over to land on Tenchi's desk.

"Tenchi, are you there?"

Tenchi touched the beetle's head as it craned up at him. An air-window opened instantly.

"If you're not busy, could you come to the lab?"

"What happened?"

Tenchi looked back at Washu's sharp, emerald-green eyes.

"The gem has started to divide. You'll regret it if you miss this."

"Really?"

Tenchi left his travel guide right where it was and stood up. "I'll be right down."

Without even waiting to see Washu's smug smile, Tenchi dashed down the stairs, startling Ayeka in the living room.

"Tenchi, what's the matter?"

"The lab—"

That was all that could be heard. The door separating the Masaki house from subspace had slid shut with a whoosh.

"So this is..."

Tenchi's eyes went wide as he stared at the polyhedral crystal floating in the cultivation tank.

The transparent red polyhedron—like a ruby—had grown large enough that it no longer fit in the palm of a hand, and was pulsing faintly in the nutrient solution.

"That's right. This is going to become Mayuka," said Washu, smiling smugly in her white lab coat, very much the genius scientist.

"The crystal Tenchi brought back from the world of darkness is information materialized in physical form—it was in a static state. Left alone, it could have stayed that way for tens of thousands of years. By arranging the right conditions and converting the information from a static to a dynamic state—in a word, awakening it. You know how they've managed to germinate seeds from thousands of years ago on this planet? Simply put, it's something like that."

"Hmm..." Tenchi stared hard at the crystal.

"Will it really become a person?"

"Whether she's purely human is debatable. By Jurai standards, she has darkness mixed in her blood."

Washu gave an amused laugh.

"But once she's born, that doesn't matter. This child will undeniably be born on Earth, and should grow up to be a Japanese person with Japanese as her native language. No different from any baby around here. You could even give her a new name."

"Hmm..."

In Tenchi's mind, Mayuka's smile—bright as a summer sky—floated up.

"I still like Mayuka. She'll turn out to be a cute girl, I'm sure."

"All babies are cute," said Ayeka, who had appeared at some point and was smiling with gentle eyes.

"Not a chance," Ryoko interjected, peering into the cultivation tank with a grin. "She'll definitely be an unruly little troublemaker. What do you expect from a kid raised by some sheltered princess?"

"Better than being raised by a space pirate with two hundred and forty-seven prior offenses," Ayeka sniffed, turning away and appealing to Tenchi.

"Don't you agree, Lord Tenchi?"

"If you average the two... it sounds like things would get even wilder," Tenchi couldn't help imagining.

Over the tiny baby's head, Ryoko and Ayeka would argue about parenting philosophy while Sasami and Washu looked on in exasperation. On every little thing—food, clothing—there was no way the two would ever agree. Would she be dressed like a princess with the heart of a pirate? Or fashionably fierce on the outside but a refined lady within? Or would there be Father's wish to raise her as a proper young woman, Grandpa's desire to train her in the Masaki school of Lighthawk sword swordsmanship, and Washu's insistence on giving her a Galaxy Academy-level education—all converging on one tiny baby?

"Things are going to be hectic," Tenchi sighed, peering at the crystal that had not yet taken human form.

"Are you gonna be okay, Mayuka?"

"Come on, you're worrying about the future when she hasn't even been born yet? Tenchi, you're getting ahead of yourself," Ryoko teased, sidling up close.

"Lord Tenchi is such a kind and caring person," Ayeka said warmly, moving in from the other side. "I intend to follow his example and become a gentle mother."

"Ayeka and Ryoko will both be great mothers," Tenchi said.

The warmth of both women radiated through him from either side, wrapping his heart in a soft glow.

"For Sasami, she'll be a little sister, and for Washu, I imagine she'll be a student."

"Oh? Am I not a mother then?" Washu called out, having heard every word.

"No, I didn't mean it like that..."

Tenchi smiled awkwardly. It was true that Washu was the one nurturing Mayuka's origin—but somehow, Washu in her lab coat looked nothing like a mother.

"And Tenchi doesn't look like a father at all," Washu shot back, as sharp as ever.

"Well, anyway. After all, the only ones in this house with any experience raising children are me and Nobuyuki. It's obvious who'll end up doing the work."

With that, Washu began shooing the onlookers out.

"All right, a watched pot never boils. She's not going to take human form anytime soon, so today's viewing session is over."

Even after leaving the lab, that sweet, ticklish feeling lingered.

We're not even married yet, and we're waiting for a child to be born... it's irregular, Tenchi thought—but it wasn't an unpleasant feeling at all.

The September rain continued to fall silently, and even as night came it went on, coldly soaking the garden plants without pause. But in Tenchi's chest, a quiet flame of joy had kindled, casting warmth all the way until he drifted off to sleep.

It was the following afternoon when Katsuhito arrived—Ayeka's brother, known to his family as Yosho.

The rain that had seemed to stop in the morning had started up again immediately, and the air was as cold and damp as the height of the rainy season.

"My, Brother, what brings you here? Do you have some business with me?"

The bored Ayeka happily welcomed her brother in, nearly colliding with Tenchi who appeared a moment later.

"Mm," Katsuhito said, drifting past Tenchi in his usual nonchalant way and settling himself on the living room sofa.

"Some tea, if you would. Gyokuro[1], please—the water at sixty degrees. A serving of wasanbon sugar alongside would be even better."

"Y-yes, of course."

Ayeka went to the kitchen, boiled water with the precision of a chemistry experiment, carefully prepared the finest gyokuro tea, and brought it back with a delicate dry confection on a guest saucer.

"What's up, Grandpa?" Tenchi asked right away, himself having nothing to do.

"Field work is on hold today, I see."

Katsuhito sipped the tea and gave a satisfied nod.

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[1] This is a savory high l-theanine (relaxant) tea made through special cultivation methods.

"Mm, Ayeka has become quite accomplished when it comes to tea."

"Thank you."

Ayeka gave a small bow, quietly tilting her head in puzzlement.

I wonder what Brother has come for. He can't have come all this way in the rain just for tea...

"Ayeka, this planet is beautiful, is it not?"

Katsuhito gazed out the window and narrowed his eyes.

"When rain like this falls continuously in autumn, after the cool weather sets in, it is called akirin—the autumn rains. Some also call it 'akitsuri,' and it has a certain refined quality, don't you think?"

"Is that so?"

Ayeka looked vaguely toward the garden. The autumn seven flowers—which Katsuhito had helped her pick from the mountain behind the house—hung their heads under the silken rain.

"The seven flowers—bush clover, pampas grass, kudzu vine, pinks, maiden flower, boneset, and bellflower, if I recall correctly."

"You've learned well."

Katsuhito nodded again.

"Ayeka, you have adapted quite well to this planet. You could live here quite comfortably as a Japanese woman now."

"Brother?"

Katsuhito finally turned and faced Ayeka directly.

"I had a message from Lady Funaho yesterday. Your father has gone missing."

"What?"

For a moment Ayeka couldn't make sense of her brother's words.

"What did you just say...?"

"His Majesty has gone missing."

"Missing!?"

"The emperor of Jurai?! When!?" Tenchi asked in disbelief at the sudden news. "Why? What happened?"

"Wait," Katsuhito said calmly, draining his tea and leaning back on the sofa.

"About one week ago by Jurai's calendar—around ten days ago by Earth time, since Jurai and Earth have different orbital periods—His Majesty had been very busy with official duties that day. When he finally had a break, he said he was stepping out for a bit. Lady Funaho and Lady Misaki never imagined he still wouldn't be home a week later. Even so, there had been occasions in the past when he'd go out hunting and not return for a day and a night, so they agreed to wait. Three days in, it became clear that his ship had cut off all contact after passing beyond Jurai's patrol zone.

His Majesty's ship is one of the highest-ranked in the imperial family. When he wants to disappear, there's nothing lower-ranked systems can do. At this point, the Ladies concluded that his disappearance had been carried out with some degree of planning. At the same time, they decided they had no choice but to inform the Grand Council.

As you well know, Ayeka, the Juraian royal family is not just made up of the Masaki

house. There are three other great houses, and the Grand Council is made up of members from all four. Some of them have less-than-admirable characters who are harsh toward any failure by the Masaki house.

But it would come out eventually, and concealing it would only invite more criticism—so the Ladies chose to announce His Majesty Azusa's absence as 'a personal whim of the emperor of Jurai.'"

"A personal whim? But why would Father disappear...?"

"Even the Ladies don't know."

Katsuhito looked at Ayeka with concern.

"The truth is in His Majesty's heart. That said, I don't believe the circumstances are too grave. I believe that."

"But why? What if he's in some sort of danger?"

"No, I don't think we need to worry about that. Think about it calmly."

Katsuhito leaned forward, as if to reassure her.

"His Majesty's ship is the strongest in Jurai save for Tsunami. His Majesty himself is among the two or three finest fighters in the entire imperial family. Any fool who would attack knowing he is the emperor of Jurai simply does not exist in this galaxy."

"But..."

Ayeka pressed her temples.

"Why? Why suddenly?"

"I don't know. If I had to guess—it's the Masaki family temperament, handed down through the generations. His Majesty is a man. There's nothing strange about him wanting to taste freedom now and then."

"....."

Ayeka furrowed her brow, staring back at her composed brother with an expression that said she simply didn't understand.

"So, Brother, what do you intend to—"

She suddenly half-rose from her seat.

"Then who is governing Jurai right now?"

"The Ladies are acting as regents. Ayeka, you needn't worry."

"Did Mother say something to you? She told you to come back, didn't she? You're returning to Jurai, aren't you, Brother?"

Ayeka was sharp.

"No—it's the opposite."

A shadow crossed Katsuhito's expression.

"The Ladies said I need not return. 'Yosho, you are head of the Masaki house, and Ayeka surely wants to remain at Tenchi's side—I do not wish to tear apart the earthly Masaki family on account of your father's whims,' is what they said."

"Which mother said that?"

"Lady Funaho. Which is why it's frightening."

"And Lady Misaki?"

"She said 'Don't force yourself to come back—things will be fine.'"

Ayeka fell deep in thought.

"I..."

She turned to Tenchi.

"What should I do?"

"Uh, well..."

The emperor of Jurai, missing?! Tenchi still couldn't quite process it all, but he answered anyway.

"I think you should probably go back once to see how things are. You're the first princess, Ayeka, and Lady Misaki is your mother. I'm sure at a time like this, she'd want to see your face."

"Yes... you're right."

She turned back to her brother.

"If you go, you won't be able to simply return. Even if you don't mean to let that happen—it will."

"But..."

Katsuhito appeared to weigh things over in silence for a moment.

"I get the feeling Father has set a trap for us somehow, but do as you see fit. Take a full night to think about it."

Katsuhito rose.

"Don't brood over it too much. After all, this is Father we're talking about. The moment you return, he might show up from somewhere."

Katsuhito gave a wry smile, patted Ayeka on the head as a parting gift, and left with the same unhurried step with which he'd arrived.

Ayeka watched him go with an absent mind, but once her brother's figure disappeared from view, she pressed her lips together and knocked on the door to the lab.

"Washu, are you there?"

Ayeka's expression when she turned back was tense.

"I'd like to contact Mother to find out what's really happening. Please come with me, Lord Tenchi."

The emperor of Jurai has gone missing? What on Earth is happening?

Still unable to think past that one question, Tenchi followed Ayeka through the door to the lab.

"I'm ho-ome!"

"Welcome back, Sasami. Did you get wet?"

Ryoko—who it seemed had been out somewhere during the day in Ayeka's place—greeted the girl.

"Nope. Where's Sis?"

"Beats me. Want a doughnut?"

Ryoko held out the whole box and started scratching at a prize card.

"Ugh, one point short."

"Oh, is that the one where you can win a bento box?"

"Yep. What color do you want, Sasami?"

"Yellow! Hmm, let me think."

Ryoko and Sasami pressed their heads together cheerfully to pick their prize.

"Ryoko-neechan, Sports Day is October eighteenth," Sasami said.

"Sports Day again?"

"It's every year. And tomorrow in P.E. they're picking the relay runners. I wonder if I'll make it... I hope I do."

"Leave the cheering to me."

Ryo-Ohki and the kitten, who had been curled up together on a cushion in the tatami room, heard Sasami's voice and stretched themselves awake.

"Ryo-chan! Misoka-chan! Want a doughnut?"

"Myah?"

The elementary schooler full of energy regardless of sun or rain, the former space pirate, and the spaceship that had a kitten utterly devoted to it all sat down happily together to eat doughnuts.

"Sasami, you're home?"

Ayeka came in carrying Sasami's school bag, which had been dumped at the entrance.

"Oh, Sis! Where were you?"

Ayeka didn't answer, sitting down with a clouded brow.

"Sasami, is this Saturday a holiday?"

"Yep, it's the fourth week."

"When school is done tomorrow, let's go visit our mothers."

"What, back to Jurai? Why?"

Seeing her little sister tilt her head in innocent confusion, a resolution formed in Ayeka's heart.

Sasami was still a child.

Telling her the truth now would only confuse and upset her.

"Lady Misaki and Lady Funaho both said they want to see you. It's been a while—let's go show our faces."

Ayeka did her best to act casual, praying her lie wouldn't show.

"Okay," Sasami answered, though she seemed a little uncertain.

"I guess I won't be able to play with Yuki-chan then."

"It's so sudden—shall I apologize to her on your behalf?"

"No, that's okay. She's my best friend—she won't mind."

"What, you going home for a visit?" Ryoko asked, having been listening with great interest. "What suddenly made you feel like being a good daughter? What's going on, Ayeka? Did another marriage interview come up?"

"It's none of your business, Ryoko," Ayeka answered bluntly, unable to take the joke.

"Oh, is that so? None of my business, huh. Fine, I'm just a commoner with no connection to the imperial family. Okay, me and Tenchi will hold down the fort while you leisurely stretch your wings."

Ryoko instantly teleported to Tenchi's side and wrapped her arm around him.

"Ryoko-neechan, you're gonna start a fight again," Sasami said with a here-we-go-again expression and bit into her second doughnut.

"I don't care. She started it, not me."

"Ryoko, cut it out."

Tenchi, who knew the truth, anxiously removed Ryoko's arm and stole a glance at Ayeka's face.

"I'm simply taking advantage of the days off to visit my mothers. There's nothing for you to comment on."

"Hmm... something definitely happened."

Ryoko's eyes lit up.

"Come on, tell me. We're family living under the same roof. You can tell Washu but not me? Tenchi, you know too, don't you? I'm not going to do anything—just tell me. Or I'll kiss you."

Ryoko grinned and put Tenchi in a headlock, then leaped up to the beam near the ceiling with him.

"Ryoko! Cut it out—this is no time to joke around."

Tenchi went pale looking down at the floor far below.

Ryoko's always watching us from up here... the different planes we live on seem completely different from the start.

"Oh? It's something that serious? All the more reason to tell me then."

Ryoko hugged Tenchi delightedly and pressed her cheek to his.

"Ayeka, you're so stubborn. Is it that hard to tell someone?"

"Stop that! This is a matter of great urgency for the Juraian royal family!"

Ayeka leaped to her feet, trembling with anger as she glared at Ryoko.

"Huh!?"

Ryoko's eyes went wide, and Sasami froze with a doughnut halfway to her mouth.

"Sis, what do you mean—urgent?"

Ayeka realized her mistake, but it was already too late.

"Ryoko, put me down already," Tenchi said.

"Oh, uh—right."

Ryoko floated gently down through the air like a deflating balloon, and partway down released Tenchi from her grip.

Fortunately, they were less than a meter from the floor.

"Sis!!"

Ayeka glanced briefly at her little sister. The distress was written plainly on her face.

"Sasami, don't be scared. The truth is, we got word from Mother—Father has gone missing."

"Missing?"

Sasami looked blank.

"Missing like... the kind they talk about on the news? Is Father lost? Did he die?"

"No, no."

Ayeka hurried over when she saw the brightness fading from Sasami's eyes.

"That would be missing without knowing if someone is alive or dead. Father simply went out somewhere without saying a word. He must have forgotten to call, so our mothers are worried. He'll be home soon."

"But we don't know that, do we?"

Sasami's eyes grew moist.

"What happened to Father? Did he have a fight with our mothers?"

"Of course not."

Ayeka felt a sudden stab of guilt.

Oh no... because I'm always fighting with Ryoko, this child has started to think of things that way...

"Sasami, I'm going back to Mother right away! Ryoko-neechan, can I borrow Ryo-Ohki?"

Sasami bravely held back tears and stood up.

"Sure, but..."

Ryoko turned with a troubled look.

"Hey, Ayeka! Why did you keep something this important secret? I don't fight with you because I hate you. If you're in trouble, just say so. I'd help you out as much as you needed."

"I only heard about it from Brother just now myself," Ayeka said, lifting her chin.

"I couldn't know anything for certain until I could check the situation. Brother left the decision to me, and I didn't know what to do either."

"So basically, Grandpa just wants to take it easy."

Ryoko snickered.

"That's not it!" Ayeka flushed.

"Brother is the first prince of the Juraian Royal Family. He didn't say a word about his own situation, but he's publicly declared he had no intention of returning—if he went back now it would get complicated. So he consulted me. The way I look at it, it makes most sense for me to go back."

What on earth has made things come to this... Ayeka thought, but there was no way to stop it now.

"A Juraian ship will come to pick us up tomorrow afternoon. Ryoko, while I'm away, please look after Lord Tenchi and the Masaki household. Please protect Lord Tenchi well."

"Tch..."

Ryoko clicked her tongue, having been outmaneuvered, then said, "Fine. Leave it to me."

With that Ryoko vanished, leaving an awkward silence in the air.

"Father..."

Sasami picked up Ryo-Ohki, who was looking up at her with worried eyes, and gently pressed her cheek to the warm fur.

"Ryo-chan, I'm sorry. Sasami won't be here for a while... please look after Misoka-chan."

"Myah..."

The kitten, who seemed to think Sasami was being stolen away, desperately stretched up with its claws.

Tenchi picked the kitten up and tucked it into the gap in Sasami's arms.

"Sasami, worrying won't help right now. Emperor Azusa is the strongest in Jurai, right?"

Sasami nodded.

"Then wherever he is, he'll be fine. Hasn't he gone out on long trips before and not come back for days?"

Sasami nodded again in silence.

"Dammit, Mihoshi would be so much better at comforting someone than me," Tenchi muttered.

Finally a faint smile crossed Sasami's cheeks.

"Thanks, Tenchi-niichan. Being worried isn't going to help, is it. I'm okay now."

The phone rang.

"Yes, Masaki residence. Sasami? Just a moment."

Tenchi handed her the receiver.

"Oh, Yuki-chan? Sorry, I can't play today... yeah, I'll explain at school tomorrow. Say hi to Marina-chan too. I'm sorry."

Sasami hung up and sighed, opening the lid of her schoolbag.

"Tenchi-niichan, can I do my homework here?"

"Didn't you have plans to play today? Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"I'll make you some delicious cocoa, Sasami. Shall I bake some cookies too?"

Seeing Sasami's dejected mood, Ayeka reached out to her.

"No, it's okay. I just had doughnuts."

Tenchi and Ayeka exchanged glances.

"I'll pop out for some shopping and be back by evening."

"Please come back soon," Ayeka said, reaching out and grabbing Tenchi's sleeve before quickly pulling her hand back.

Tenchi felt a pang in his chest at her expression, but in the end said nothing as he went out the front door.

That night...

Ayeka dozed for about an hour before snapping awake and flinging off the covers.

"Ryoko, honestly..." She dropped the honorific, since no one was listening.

With me gone, Ryoko and Lord Tenchi would...

Heart pounding, Ayeka clutched her hands together as she pursued that thought.

If Ryoko were to... if Lord Tenchi were to... for Ryoko...

She couldn't quite bring herself to say it plainly—Ayeka was a princess right down to her bones—but the thought hung there, unspoken.

If that happened, what on earth would I do?

Give up on Lord Tenchi? Or fight for him?

No, no, that's impossible—and Lord Tenchi would never do such a thing.

In her somewhat muddled state, Ayeka's thoughts began turning indignant.

It's all Father's fault for not being more responsible!

If Father comes back, I'll give him an absolute earful.

Abandoning the imperial family, the subjects, even Mother, gallivanting off who knows where... and it's not that he dislikes Lord Tenchi, but he waves his father's dignity around and takes every chance to try to bring us home...

You impossible stubborn man! Tyrant! Selfish!

Ayeka's tirade of insults suffered from an overly refined vocabulary that robbed them of any real force.

If it were Ryoko, she'd surely have words that would devastate the target far more effectively—and at that thought Ayeka noticed herself oscillating between using and dropping honorifics, and felt her cheeks go hot.

She found herself rather transparent, she thought.

Meanwhile, on the rooftop, Ryoko was sitting with her pent-up frustration.

"That Ayeka..."

She hadn't used an honorific from the start.

She thinks the moment she's gone, I'll make my move right away. With Sasami gone too, she figures I'd do as I please in the middle of the day—push Tenchi down and do all sorts of things, she thinks.

Who does she think I am?! Some cat in heat!?

Ryoko nearly smashed her fist into a roof tile in frustration, but remembered the sort of things she herself usually said and did around Tenchi, and felt her cheeks flush.

"Tch."

She clicked her tongue.

This leaves me no room to maneuver.

I can't keep picturing Ayeka's face every time I make a move on Tenchi—it makes me feel terrible.

But to let such a perfect opportunity go...

"Damn you, Ayeka! I'll do whatever I want!"

Ryoko thrust her finger at the night sky from which the rain had finally cleared and floated up.

"This leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Maybe I'll go tease some whales off the coast of New Zealand."

This was, in fact, the real reason why Ryoko so often disappeared.

The next morning, Ryoko and Ayeka were each clearly short on sleep, not speaking to one another as they wolfed down breakfast.

Sasami, looking somewhat better than the previous day, left for school. Tenchi glanced back several times as he headed out to the fields. As soon as he was gone, Ayeka returned to her room and began gathering anything that would be "dangerous" if found.

"What would Ryoko say if she found these..."

Ayeka tucked her secret notebook into her things, carefully deleted her personal data from the ansible, then looked vacantly around the room.

"How silly of me... I'll be back before long."

I've been in this house the whole time. I never once left.

I experienced the four seasons together with this house, watched the flowers bloom, learned every household task one by one.

Together with Lord Tenchi... to become a good wife.

"What am I doing? I'm being ridiculous..."

Ayeka left her things where they were and ran out of the room, heading to the kitchen.

"Miss Ayeka, is something the matter?"

The gentle George was washing up after breakfast.

"No, nothing," Ayeka said.

"Let me make you some tea. Please, have a seat."

For some reason Ayeka felt her tension ease as she sat down and looked around the well-organized, polished kitchen.

That's right—what am I so worked up about? Washu is here, and George is here too...

"Your escort will come this afternoon, won't it?" George said, setting out Ayeka's favorite herbal tea in her most-loved cup.

"Please don't worry about things here. Not a single one of your precious potted plants will be allowed to wilt."

"Thank you."

Ayeka finally smiled. She could feel her own expression softening.

"Please take good care of Lord Tenchi."

"It sounds as though this is a permanent farewell," George said, smiling.

"Shall I send you daily reports? Or would you prefer Tenchi?"

"No, it's all right."

Ayeka realized that this quiet robot was teasing her, and felt her cheeks flush.

"Oh, stop it. Do I really seem that way?"

"Miss Ayeka is the flower of the Masaki household," George said with a smile as Ayeka's cheeks grew even pinker.

Late in the afternoon, the Masaki family gathered by the pond and silently watched as a beam of light like a pillar descended from a Juraian ship.

"Lord Tenchi, Brother, Ayeka will take her leave now. Please give my regards to uncle Nobuyuki. I'll contact you once we've arrived."

At Ayeka's side were Sasami, and the guardians Azaka and Kamidake.

"Sasami, here—take this," Tenchi said, handing her a bag stuffed with snacks and a game cartridge he'd just bought.

"Thanks, Tenchi-niichan!" Sasami beamed up at him.

"I'll be back soon. Please look after Ryo-chan and Misoka-chan."

"Ayeka," Ryoko said with a grin and a finger-gun. "Have a good long vacation."

"While I'm away, please stand guard at the entrance in place of Azaka and Kamidake," Ayeka shot back, and disappeared into the pillar of light with Sasami.

Mihoshi and Kiyone called not an hour later.

"What!? Ayeka!? And Sasami too!?"

Mihoshi's voice could be heard in the background: give me the phone, she said.

"The emperor of Jurai is missing!?... That's huge. We might be reassigned... Wait, I'm coming over."

Tenchi held the receiver, feeling the quiet knock of fate at his door.

Chapter Two:

Tenchi Waited Faithfully for the Two to Return

Tenchi waited faithfully for the two to return.

Since Kiyone had cut the call short, he figured they wouldn't take too long to arrive. But when he noticed the room had grown dark and switched on the light, an hour had passed. When he wondered what was taking them, another thirty minutes had gone by.

Tenchi sighed and tossed the magazine he'd been holding onto the side table. Despite having read it without looking up, he couldn't recall a single thing.

"Helloooo ♡"

A cheerful, heart-symbol-laden voice floated in from the direction of the front door.

"Tenchi-saaan, are you ho-ome?"

"Sorry we're late. Here—a souvenir. Just rice crackers, though."

Behind Mihoshi, Kiyone held out a convenience store bag.

"Oh, thanks. You didn't have to."

Meeting them at the door, Tenchi finally felt something like relief.

"I was so shocked. Out of nowhere like that! I wonder what happened... well, there's probably nothing we can do about it. It sounds like Jurai has a gag order in place anyway."

"You already checked into it?"

Tenchi remembered something he often forgot, seeing Kiyone's face.

Despite having been on Earth so long that their part-time lives felt second nature, Kiyone and Mihoshi were originally first-class detectives of the Galaxy Police—galactically renowned, at that.

"Subtly," Miho-Kiyo said, settling onto the living room sofa.

"Well, it hasn't been confirmed as a disappearance. He could come back tomorrow. Still—Emperor Jurai going missing."

Kiyone looked around the living room.

She met Ryoko's eyes—Ryoko who was leaning against the wall with her arms folded, so quiet that one might think she wasn't there.

"What! I thought you weren't here since you were so quiet. What's wrong with you, spacing out like that?"

"Nothing," Ryoko answered flatly.

"You don't have to be quiet all the time, you know."

Seeing Ryoko's eyes start to narrow dangerously, Kiyone quickly added a cheerful look.

"But with Ayeka and Sasami gone, it does feel lonely, doesn't it? Strange how it feels when someone who's always there suddenly isn't."

"Yeah," Tenchi agreed, and the conversation paused.

Immediately the chirping of insects filled their ears.

Tenchi absently glanced at the clock and remembered that the TV was usually on around this time.

It was right around when dinner started—someone always chatting about something, occasionally glancing at the screen, drinking tea.

"Oh, I haven't even made tea..."

Tenchi stood up.

"Hey, have you two eaten yet?"

"No, I just got here from work."

"Oh, same—I haven't fed Ryo-Ohki carrots yet."

Tenchi and Mihoshi and Kiyone all looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

"Without Sasami, look at us," Tenchi said.

He opened the rice cooker. The rice had already been measured and soaked—just waiting for the button.

"Oh no."

Tenchi clicked his tongue and pressed the switch.

Sasami had gotten everything ready, and he'd completely forgotten.

But now that he had rice, what would he do? Eat rice porridge?

Tenchi gave up and knocked on the door of the lab.

"George, sorry. Can you make dinner?"

George appeared, the smell of cooking began to drift from the kitchen, and it finally felt like a normal evening had returned.

"Both of you, stay for dinner tonight."

As the conversation moved away from Ayeka and Sasami and into small talk, and Ryoko joined in, and laughter returned to the table, Tenchi felt the tension in the back of his neck loosen.

What am I doing?

He inwardly laughed at himself for being so flustered, and stole a sideways glance at Ryoko.

Just be normal—that's all. Ryoko's doing that, isn't she?

He told himself that.

But Dad's going to be disappointed when he gets home.

He couldn't say goodbye to Ayeka and Sasami.

If Emperor Jurai came back in a day or two, it would all be fine, but... wait, I'm going in circles again.

Dinner was over. After getting worked up over a quiz show with roasted barley tea and sugar-dipped wheat crackers, Mihoshi and Kiyone said goodnight and left. Only then did Tenchi realize they'd been checking on him.

"There's nothing you can do by worrying," Kiyone had said.

"That's right," Mihoshi quickly added. "I think we'll be hearing from Ayeka on the ansible before long."

"Lord Tenchi..."

The two spoke in unison.

"Please wait until I return!"

Ryoko had sulked—so that was what they'd meant.

Tenchi laughed to himself at the memory and sighed at the thought of the coming days.

The following day.

Tenchi, who had slept in, came downstairs to the smell of miso soup.

"Good morning, Tenchi."

George stood at the kitchen as always, breakfast already laid out on the table.

"Oh—good morning."

He nearly said, Where's Sasami? But caught himself just in time.

"Right. She's gone..."

"Tenchi, when are Ayeka and Sasami coming back?"

Nobuyuki, who had already finished breakfast, was listlessly watching the news with the paper in hand.

"Good morni-ing, Tenchi!"

Ryoko, in a completely different mood from the night before, came flying over.

"Hey, why the long face? Let's go somewhere fun today, just the two of us. Anywhere you want—Hawaii? Hong Kong?"

"Ryoko, cut it out."

Tenchi brushed off Ryoko's arm around him and sat down at the table.

"Is Washu around? Has anything come in from Ayeka?"

"Lady Washu had toast and coffee for breakfast this morning," George reported, turning around. "There don't appear to be any messages yet."

"I see."

Well, it was only yesterday...

"Ayeka's in a tough spot. I hope at least Sasami can come back."

Nobuyuki muttered as if to himself.

"Dad..."

Tenchi was about to ask about the office, then realized it was a holiday.

He clicked his tongue inwardly.

He'd been off-kilter since yesterday.

"Excuse me."

Tenchi finished eating in a daze and moved to the sofa.

"Ryo-Ohki, you were here?"

"Myah..."

Ryo-Ohki, curled up on Sasami's sweatshirt with the kitten, raised her head briefly, then curled back up and went to sleep.

"You're lonely too, aren't you."

Stretching his hand out to stroke both the kitten and Ryo-Ohki, Tenchi stood up again, restless.

"Hey Tenchi, what are you fidgeting about? You've eaten, there's nothing left to do—come hang out with me today."

Ryoko moved in as if she'd been waiting.

"Somewhere close is fine. Want to go get ice cream?"

"Come on."

Tenchi glanced up at the cold grey sky.

"Ice cream seems a little chilly for the weather. Either way, I'm staying home today. Ayeka might call."

Immediately Ryoko's eyes narrowed.

"What the heck, you've been all 'Ayeka, Ayeka' since yesterday! If you're that worried, just go to Jurai yourself!"

"What!?" Tenchi snapped back.

"I can't go there—I'm worried because I haven't heard from her, that's all."

"And what do you think worrying about it will accomplish?"

Ryoko wasn't backing down.

"I was trying to cheer you up, using all kinds of consideration. So mope around the house all day if you want!"

Ryoko huffed off and disappeared entirely.

"What's her problem?"

Tenchi stared exasperatedly at the empty space where Ryoko had been, sighed, and sat down again.

I shouldn't have said that... he said to himself.

"Hey, Dad. What are you doing today?"

"Me? I've got work this afternoon, so I'm heading out."

"Right..."

Tenchi looked at the sofa where Ayeka usually sat, then at Sasami's favorite corner.

It's strange how much you notice someone when they're suddenly gone...

"Ayeka—she will come back, won't she?"

"What's this all of a sudden?"

Nobuyuki folded his newspaper and set it on the side table.

"I mean, if the emperor of Jurai doesn't come back for months, won't Ayeka be unable to come back either?"

"Then that can't be helped," Nobuyuki answered plainly.

"Ayeka is a princess of Jurai. Her position is different from ours. The same goes for Sasami. Even if they're called back from their overseas posting due to family circumstances, well—it can't be helped."

"Then you'd be okay with Ayeka not coming back?"

Nobuyuki turned to face Tenchi squarely and ran a hand through his hair with a here-we-go expression.

"Tenchi, why are you so on edge? That's not something we decide. If you're restless, go see Grandpa. I don't understand the Juraian royal family situation."

The living room fell silent except for the sound of the TV as Tenchi went quiet.

"Sorry, Dad. I'm going upstairs."

He retreated to his room, flopped onto his bed, and stared at the ceiling.

"Oh, this is hopeless..."

He'd been off all day yesterday and today.

I'm so preoccupied... maybe I genuinely have feelings for Ayeka...

He pressed his cheek to the pillow and Ayeka's shy smile rose in his mind.

Her head tilted just slightly, her hesitant eyes holding back overflowing emotion as she looked up at him.

Her soft cheek touched with the faintest blush of cherry blossom, her lips calling to him as if there were something she wanted to say.

Lord Tenchi...?

He thought he heard Ayeka's voice and opened his eyes involuntarily.

"Ayeka?"

His heart was pounding.

Tenchi lay sprawled on the bed, unable to do anything with his swirling feelings, before finally getting up and quietly slipping out of the room.

He stopped in front of Ayeka's room.

He glanced behind him—as if someone were watching, even though no one was—then gently opened the door.

The room was neatly tidied.

The furniture Ayeka and Sasami had used was still there, but the bedding had been put away, and the full-length mirror had a cover on it.

Tenchi sat down in front of the writing desk. Without touching the terminal on the desk, he gently slid open the drawer.

It seemed she'd tidied it before leaving—there was only some stationery, a few notebooks, a dictionary, and miscellaneous pamphlets.

Heart pounding, Tenchi opened a notebook and flipped through the pages.

In beautiful, slender handwriting, as if a pale hand were tracing delicate brushstrokes, Japanese waka and haiku poems had been carefully copied out.

"So this is how she studied..."

Mingled with Juraian script, the copies went on for page after page before becoming blank.

In other notebooks, sentences apparently copied from a penmanship workbook were repeated over and over.

He didn't find anything like a diary.

"I'm such an idiot," he muttered in shame.

Going through someone's private things while they're away—if she knew, it wouldn't just be her doubting his character.

I'm worried and can't settle down—he tried to reason internally.

No matter what excuse he made, snooping was snooping.

It wasn't like there was anything to worry about finding... but at that thought, Tenchi suddenly realized.

Had Ayeka seen this coming? Hadn't she made sure beforehand to remove or take with her anything that would be a problem to have found?

In that case, what does it say about me...

"Hm. I see."

A voice came from behind him without warning, and Tenchi nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Ryoko!?"

Ryoko had had only half her body poking through the ceiling, but now she flipped over and landed on the floor.

"Nothing there, right? That's just who she is."

"Uh...?"

While Tenchi was still flustered, Ryoko moved up behind him.

"You were snooping, weren't you?"

She whispered right in his ear.

"I. Saw. E-very-thing."

Ryoko wrapped her arms around Tenchi and held him.

"Th-this, well, uh..."

When he turned around in surprise their noses nearly bumped.

"Well, what should I do?"

Ryoko's eyes danced with amusement.

"Ryoko!"

Tenchi panicked and struggled to free himself.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but don't do anything weird. I came here because I—"

"I know, I know."

Ryoko's hand gently stroked Tenchi's cheek—and then in the same motion, pulled him down onto the floor.

"Tenchi..."

Her golden eyes moved close.

"Do you hate me?"

There was a split second where Tenchi felt his breath would stop—Ryoko looked down at him with a burning gaze as if her life depended on his answer.

"Am I not the one you want?"

Suddenly his lips were covered, and Tenchi lay there helpless, staring up at the ceiling of Ayeka's empty room.

The lingering scent of Green Note[2] drifted from Ryoko's blue hair.

"Tenchi."

Ryoko raised her head. Her eyes shone golden, translucent as a cat's, questioning him as though searching for the right answer.

"Is it a no?"

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[2] A Japanese hair care brand

For a moment, an overwhelming power stirred awake in Tenchi's chest—fierce, all-consuming, threatening to transform everything.

But the next instant, Ryoko let go and turned away.

"Is it a no... always the same."

One moment of hesitation had changed the air between them.

Ryoko floated up, and with sad eyes that felt like a knife in his chest, looked down at Tenchi.

"Ryoko, wait!"

Ryoko's fingers lightly tapped his cheek—and then she was gone.

Tenchi lay there, stunned, staring at the empty space where she had been.

In the end, Ayeka's ansible came through later that same day.

Since Ryoko and Nobuyuki hadn't come home, Tenchi was stuck having dinner alone with Washu—and he'd been so checked out he'd forgotten what show he was watching.

"You're not yourself today, Tenchi."

The genius scientist, utterly unchanged as always, was on her second saury fish.

"If you think I'm going to ask, you can delete that expectation right now. Your face says something happened."

"Huh?"

Tenchi finally looked up, then went red when he caught the meaning.

"I don't, I mean—"

"That's fine, I'm not asking. Who said you had to tell? Though I will say—Sasami and both the big bosses are gone, and it does get quiet."

"Yeah."

Washu shrugged subtly and stacked her finished plates.

"Speaking of which, Tenchi—what if I told you I was going away too?"

"Wh-what!?"

Tenchi's face went pale as if cold water had been thrown on him, and Washu felt a private pang of sympathy—though she didn't let it show.

"The Galaxy Academy sent a request asking me to run a short course. An invitation from the current chancellor, so I'd like to go if I can. How does that sound?"

"I mean..."

Tenchi was stuck for words.

"I guess you have to go?"

"I was going to turn it down if you absolutely insisted, but there are things I want to do on that side too."

"I see."

Tenchi looked down.

"I don't mind at all. When would you leave?"

"Tomorrow or the day after."

Washu stood up.

"Right. Then Tonight Washu will make the coffee. From Natsu-Hoshi's finest stock."

Natsu-Hoshi brand premium coffee had a faint hint of mint—it felt as if the fog in his head cleared all at once.

"Washu..."

A little bit of normal awareness was coming back.

"Why so suddenly?"

"It's just how things work out. I know it's bad timing to be leaving, but don't overthink things, Tenchi. Just do what you need to do."

It felt like she'd seen straight to the bottom of him, and Tenchi had no reply.

But it wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

When Washu said it, somehow he felt at ease.

"Could I have another cup of coffee, please?"

The golden beetle terminal resting on the ceiling let out a cool sound just then.

"Hold on, I'll go to the lab."

Washu listened to the beetle's message as it flew down to her with a buzzing of wings, then nodded at Tenchi with the coffee pot and mug in hand.

"Come on in. Someone important for you."

Stepping into the lab, he was immediately met with Ayeka's face filling the entire screen.

"Lord Tenchi!"

Her expression melted with relief.

"I'm so sorry I'm late. So many things have happened... I haven't even had time to change."

"Ayeka! How are things over there? I've been so worried since yesterday—"

It wasn't a lie.

But the happiness of being able to see Ayeka's face—even through the ansible—outweighed it.

"I'm all right. Sasami is well too."

Whether she felt that happiness in him, Ayeka gave a shy smile.

"Father is still not found. What's worse, we don't even know the cause. I asked Lady Misaki, I asked Lady Funaho, and they both just said, 'Well...' I was confused myself and didn't know what to do. But I couldn't just sit still—so I went around asking everyone I could find. Attendants, the head of the royal guard, personal ladies-in-waiting..."

"Did you find anything out?"

Ayeka's expression darkened.

"No."

There was a pause, and a vast distance seemed to stretch between Tenchi and Ayeka, the whole galaxy between them.

"Lord Tenchi."

When she finally raised her face, there was resolve in her eyes.

"I won't be able to come back to Earth for a while. I want to stay here and be a support to my mothers. I feel sorry for Sasami, but there's nothing to be done. But..."

She looked at him now with pleading eyes.

"I want to go home to Earth. Actually, Lady Funaho and Lady Misaki both said I could go back. But now that I've come, I can't just do that, can I? If I left now I know exactly what people would say—what on Earth did she come back for? That would naturally become criticism directed at the Masaki family and hurt my mothers. I am the first princess. That would be far too irresponsible."

Tenchi could only nod.

"I shouldn't be telling you this, but in the short time since I came back, any number of rumours have already reached my ears. That the emperor of Jurai has abandoned the Royal family. That his son and daughter are gallivanting about on another planet. That the Masaki family lacks any sense of responsibility... how vile!"

Ayeka's expression hardened.

An intensity Tenchi had never seen on Earth—the fierceness that spoke of imperial blood—appeared in her eyes, and he was taken aback.

"I must fight those who speak such things. They would use this opportunity to slander the Masaki family. I must protect us..."

Ayeka stopped herself as if she'd caught her breath.

"I'm sorry. I said something that will only worry you more. Lord Tenchi—please be my support. Even separated by the vast ocean of stars, knowing that you are there gives me the courage and the joy to keep going. So..."

As if ashamed of how much she'd been talking, Ayeka looked away.

"Never mind. Good night, Lord Tenchi. I'll call again tomorrow."

"Ayeka—do your best."

Tenchi leaned forward before he knew it.

"Don't worry about things here. I'll always be right here."

"Lord Tenchi..."

A smile finally returned to Ayeka's cheeks.

"I'm so glad. That's what I wanted to hear."

The ansible cut out with something like a sad whisper.

Tenchi sat motionless for a long moment staring at the darkened screen.

"Well, well—it seems she's completely forgotten about the genius scientist right here."

He turned around at the teasing voice to find Washu sitting with a smirk, sipping her coffee.

"Oh... sorry. I was out of it..."

"She seems to be out of it too. Obstacles make love burn brighter, as they say."

"Washu!"

Tenchi was flustered.

"Oh, did I hit a nerve? It's all right, no need to be embarrassed. Long-distance relationships thrive on communication—you'll be fine. Before I head to the Galaxy Academy, I'll give you a proper tutorial on how to use the ansible."

"Are you actually enjoying this, Washu?"

Tenchi realized he had been seen through completely—but there was no hope of winning against a genius.

"Enjoying it? Well, life should be enjoyed."

Washu's bottomless emerald eyes sparkled.

"People can't stay children forever. No one knows what comes next. That's what makes life so interesting."

She said something mysterious, as always—then took the pot, poured hot coffee into Tenchi's mug, and held it out.

"Good night, Tenchi. Have pleasant dreams."

Even after being alone, Tenchi sat on the sofa for a while, listening to the insects.

When the clock chimed midnight, he finally stood up.

Come to think of it, where did Ryoko get to?

Realizing this belatedly as if making an excuse to himself, Tenchi quietly opened the front door and went around to the garden.

The insect chorus that had been background music inside now hit with ear-splitting volume.

Then from the direction of the garage came a familiar engine sound, and soon Nobuyuki appeared.

"What, Tenchi, still up?"

"Hmm..."

The moment he saw his father's face, Tenchi was seized by a sudden, inexplicable mortification.

"Ayeka called. She says she won't be able to come back for a while."

He said it as nonchalantly as he could, then without looking back turned and went quickly inside, dashing up the stairs.

He turned off the light and closed his eyes, but the good dreams Washu had promised did not come.

Instead, Ryoko's sad eyes kept pulling him back from the edge of sleep again and again, until eventually they dissolved together with his regret into the darkness.

Mihoshi's call came in the following afternoon.

"Hello, is this Tenchi? I don't know what to do!"

After that, all he could hear from the other end was the sound of the street.

"Mihoshi? Mihoshi, is that you? What happened? Where are you?"

"In the phone box in front of Three Stars. Listen—don't be shocked. We have to go back."

"Go back? Where? Wait, what are you talking about?"

Tenchi had no idea what was happening and stared around the empty living room holding the receiver.

"Something came through on our bracelets—ah, Kiyone, cut it out!"

"Hello, Tenchi?" Kiyone's voice took over.

"I don't even know where to start, but did you hear from Ayeka?"

"Last night she called on the ansible—it sounds like Jurai's emperor still can't be found. She said she won't be back for a while."

Tenchi was puzzled, and asked, "Kiyone, what's going on? What do you mean, go back?"

"We got transfer orders."

Kiyone's reply was concise and clear.

"Official orders from Galaxy Police HQ. We have to be back at the Solar System branch tomorrow... this isn't a conversation for the street, I said to wait." The last part was apparently for Mihoshi, whose voice protested from somewhere nearby.

"Anyway, when we're done with our shift we'll come by again. The shuttle in your subspace storage room needs servicing too. Talk later."

"Hey, wait!"

Tenchi raised his voice in a panic.

"Did Ryoko stop by? She's got nothing to do anyway—want me to come partway to meet you?"

"Oh, uh... it's a bit busy right now. I mean, we've got boxes to move, and oh, a customer!"

CLICK. Beep, beep, beep...

"What is going on?!"

Tenchi pulled the receiver away from his ear and gave up, going back to the sofa.

Transfer orders? So both of them are leaving too?!

He couldn't help standing back up.

First Ayeka and Sasami—then Washu and George—now Mihoshi and Kiyone.

Was this a coincidence?

What had he done wrong?

...No, wait. Ryoko's still here.

Tenchi pictured Ryoko's face—she hadn't come back since she'd disappeared yesterday.

"Honestly, where has she wandered off to?"

Guilt gnawed at him.

She was on his mind.

She was on his mind and he couldn't do a thing about it!

"You idiot..."

Tenchi muttered irritably, grabbed the jacket he'd left on the floor, checked his wallet, and dashed out of the house.

He waited impatiently at the bus stop, and leapt onto the bus when it finally arrived.

"Oh, hello—is Kiyone around?"

He said a quick hello to Satoshi Hoshiura at the convenience store Three Stars' register and peered into the back storeroom.

"Ryoko!?"

"Ugh!"

"Tenchi!?"

From the back of the storeroom, a blue-haired head and an apron-wearing Miho-Kiyo both turned around at the same time.

"Why are you here? Kiyone, what's going on?"

Tenchi's tone sharpened involuntarily.

"Um, well—Ryoko said—"

Mihoshi broke in frantically.

"That's not what happened, Tenchi. We wanted to tell you in person instead of on the phone—"

"I told 'em to keep quiet," Ryoko said, stepping past Kiyone.

"I've made up my mind. I'll be staying here for a while. Tenchi—you won't have to feel guilty about Ayeka or brood about doing things right by her."

"Wha—"

Tenchi felt his cheeks burn hot.

"Lucky for me, there's plenty of stuff I like here, and I can drink as much as I want at night. You're fine with this, Tenchi, right? When Ayeka calls on the ansible, you can have a nice long chat. That's about the size of it."

Ryoko flashed her usual grin.

But her eyes weren't smiling.

In the storeroom dimmer than the main shop, even with its lights on, those golden eyes fixed on Tenchi.

"What are you suddenly talking about!?"

Flustered, Tenchi instinctively glanced toward the entrance.

"Are you done? We were in the middle of a meeting—inventory, checking invoices and all that."

"Ryoko—are you really planning to work here?"

The blood that had rushed to Tenchi's cheeks now drained away.

"That's right. Any objection?"

Ryoko shrugged.

"These two have to go back to the Galaxy Police now that their Ayeka babysitting gig is over—I can take over. I've got history with this store."

"Ryoko, you hadn't told him?"

Tenchi spun around in surprise.

Satoshi was peeking in from the storeroom doorway.

"Tenchi, what's wrong? I mean, I'm thrilled about Ryoko working here—well, Dad has reservations, but I personally am super happy. Can't we just talk it through? It'd be awkward if she suddenly said she changed her mind and we'd have to go look for a new face for the store again. Well, I'm kidding about that."

Satoshi gave an embarrassed grin.

"Seriously though, Ryoko helping out would really save us. My mom hasn't been well, and if Dad's focused on her side of things, she gets lonely too."

"Oh, is that right."

The wind taken out of his sails, Tenchi looked up at Satoshi's blond hair.

In the store's lighting, his flashy blond hair—unusual for around here—gleamed cheerfully.

"It's so sudden, right? I knew Mihoshi and Kiyone had some secret life I didn't get to know about, but tomorrow, just like that? I was genuinely blown away."

"What kind of way is that to put it? It makes us sound like we're doing something shady," Kiyone laughed.

"Satoshi, you adapt so fast."

"I believe in the sense of wonder," Satoshi proclaimed, shaking his blond hair dramatically.

"If you'll take me up in the spaceship, I'll give you a year of free ice cream."

"Deal!" Ryoko jabbed a middle finger.

"Satoshi, you better not forget. If that's all it takes, I'll take you up as many times as you want."

"I'm... going home."

Tenchi's head was spinning.

"It's not like I have any right to stop you anyway. Just don't cause trouble."

Tenchi walked out of the store in a daze.

Ryoko working at a convenience store?

Free ice cream for a year?!

He'd gone a good distance past the bus stop when suddenly, an epiphany struck Tenchi like a bolt of lightning.

Tomorrow Washu and George leave. When Mihoshi and Kiyone go back to the Galaxy Police, I'll be... alone!

Morning alone. Afternoon alone. Night alone?

"No—wait, Dad, Ryo-Ohki, and Misoka are all still here."

Tenchi muttered.

Someone's got to cook, and I've still got to feed Ryo-Ohki carrots.

There's the fields, and Ayeka's potted plants still need watering.

Cleaning, laundry, shopping... and there's still the toilet to scrub!

Tenchi pressed his lips together, turned around, and started back the way he'd come.

"That Ryoko..."

He glanced across the street toward the convenience store, then picked up his pace heading toward the main shopping street.

He stopped at the entrance to a game arcade with its festive blinking lights.

Tenchi shrugged and went inside—and didn't come out again until closing time.

Chapter Three:

"That Hurts, Lord Tenchi..."

"That hurts, Lord Tenchi..."

A sweet voice whispered softly, grazing his ear.

"Mm..."

Eyes still closed, Tenchi turned over and traced the soft outline with his palm.

He gently ran his index and middle fingers along the gentle curve from the shoulder down to the arm.

Even with his eyes closed, why could he see that graceful form so clearly?

Wrapped in a transparent white robe, thick black hair spread across the bedding—those eyes, full of shy longing, looked up at him in a dreamy trance.

The swell of her chest was modestly concealed by overlapping layers of her collar, but somehow Tenchi's fingers seemed to know well what petals lay hidden within.

"No..."

The word, contradicted by honey-sweet joy in her voice, came out like a breath.

"Ayeka..."

What deep, deep, mystery-filled eyes.

Tenchi's grip tightened.

I'm with someone this beautiful... someone this beautiful... in these arms.

He'd had his eyes closed just a moment ago—so why was everything suddenly so vivid?

"Hold me, Lord Tenchi."

On the bedding dissolving into dim shadow, Ayeka's flushed cheeks and lips turned rose-red.

Yes—I was thinking exactly that, Ayeka... I want to hold you.

Driven by his quickening pulse, Tenchi moved to embrace Ayeka and kiss her.

At that moment, a white shadow passed at the edge of his vision.

Ryoko!?

His pulse stopped dead and the blood drained from his face.

He sat bolt upright and looked around in the half-dark.

The glimpsed shadow moved playfully to the edge of his vision and vanished, then shifted its presence to the opposite side.

"Lord Tenchi?"

Ayeka urged him with a whisper.

The moment Tenchi looked back, the shadow vanished—leaving only the sound of rustling fabric before shifting again.

"Lord Tenchi, what is it?"

"...Someone's there."

He searched the surroundings, still feeling Ayeka's warmth in his palm.

So frustrating... just a moment ago everything had been so vivid. Why had everything blurred?

"Hmm?"

Right—I was... what was I doing?

Such a beautiful person, and I'm just ignoring her.

When Tenchi's eyes returned to Ayeka, it happened.

You...!?

The face looking back at him belonged to an unknown girl.

No—calling her unknown wasn't quite right.

Once in a dream, amid cherry blossoms, in the haze between a fading dream—the girl he'd seen there, with her wet-looking eyes, was staring up at him.

"Foolish one... are you lonely?"

The girl whispered, and her slightly upturned eyes narrowed with what might have been amusement.

And then—suddenly every scene vanished, and Tenchi was left alone in the morning light.

A dream...!?

Wiping cold sweat from his face with his sleeve, Tenchi forced his still-racing heart to calm.

His room in the crisp morning light looked strangely bright and bare.

"It was a dream?"

This was the second day after leaving Ryoko at the convenience store Three Stars and spending the night at the game arcade.

"What was I doing yesterday?"

He couldn't quite remember. He must have done something. Probably watched TV, closed the storm shutters, picked up the evening paper...

"Oh, right—I had cup ramen."

Tenchi looked down at what he was wearing.

The white sweatshirt and jeans he'd had on yesterday. On the sleeve there was a faint stain that looked like soup had splattered.

That's what made him remember.

"Ayeka..."

Looking at the crumpled futon, the earlier dream came back suddenly.

Last night the ansible hadn't called.

I wonder how she is, what's happened—he must have fallen asleep while thinking that.

Even the warmth of skin from the dream was coming back to him, and Tenchi felt a terrible squirming discomfort.

Something's wrong with me.

Even as he felt that, another part of himself whispered quietly.

Pull the cover back over your head and shut out the morning light—you could see the continuation of the dream. Let's see the continuation once more.

Come on, why not.

The whisper grew slightly louder.

Tenchi roughly yanked the curtains shut, dove under the futon, and hid in the darkness.

He closed his eyes and held still, barely breathing.

For a while, an unmoving struggle continued inside him.

The woken dream, of course, never returned.

Tenchi clicked his tongue and got up, then padded downstairs.

"Morning, Tenchi. You slept late."

Nobuyuki was watching TV and reading the paper as usual.

"Want some breakfast?"

"No thanks."

Tenchi answered dully, then noticed the kitchen.

"Breakfast? Did you make it, Dad?"

"Toast."

Silence fell for a moment.

"Looks like we'll have to go back to taking turns."

Nobuyuki stared intently at the screen, his half-drunk coffee cup in hand.

"What's Ryoko up to? Is she sleeping over at that whatever-the-name-is convenience store?"

"No idea."

Tenchi answered sulkily and got up to get coffee from the kitchen.

"Better go check on her. If it turns out like last time, it'll be a headache for you too, won't it?"

"She left on her own. She'll come back on her own."

Tenchi ate his words and put toast in the toaster.

"Ryoko won't listen to me anyway."

"Did you two have a fight?"

Tenchi flared up.

"No, we didn't! She picked a fight and flew out on her own. Why should I have to go get her?"

Nobuyuki looked at Tenchi with an oh-really expression, and Tenchi realized he'd said more than he should and went stonily silent.

"I'm going to the fields."

Tenchi went out the front door without meeting his father's eyes.

Nobuyuki watched him go with a wry smile, then sighed and stood up.

"Difficult age, isn't it. Mom, what do you do at a time like this?"

It was his honest feeling.

He was completely adapted to the strange normal life of living under the same roof with girls from outer space—so when that life evaporated so abruptly, his heart couldn't catch up.

I feel that way, and there's no way the kid is just fine with it, Nobuyuki thought about his son, but there was nothing he could do.

"Well, no use worrying. Things will work out."

Nobuyuki patted Ryo-Ohki on the head for a parting gesture and began getting ready to go out.

"Oh well..."

Tenchi came to the fields and surveyed his splendid carrot crop.

What should I do now?

He sat down on a ridge and looked up at the clear sky.

There was nothing pressing that had to be done right away.

Even so, he'd work the fields today—but tomorrow? The day after?

"Ryo-Ohki might disappear too..." he thought.

If Ryoko never came back.

In that case, there'd be no point in doing the fieldwork. He wouldn't need to make big grocery runs like before. He'd only need to cook for himself, his father, and his grandfather. Cleaning and laundry—he'd just do his own as before.

He didn't even have to do it every day. It wasn't like he had to.

There was no one he needed to be considerate of anymore.

It was like summer vacation had suddenly arrived.

In the past, summer vacation had been pretty busy—homework, studying, training. This vacation would have nothing.

Nothing had to be done at all.

He could sleep all day, go out and play all day, or get motivated and start studying for exams. He was free.

I'm free.

He could do whatever he wanted, or nothing at all.

Alone, able to do whatever he liked to his heart's content.

But Tenchi didn't feel the least bit motivated.

Just last week he'd never imagined those noisy days could disappear like this.

"Once it's gone, it's just... quiet, isn't it," he murmured, picturing the empty living room.

No one to say welcome home when he got back.

That's strange... before Ryoko and the others came, that was perfectly normal.

I used to say "I'm home" to Mom's photo.

A car horn sounded from the road, and Tenchi looked up.

"Hey, Tenchi!" Nobuyuki was leaning out of the driver's window, waving.

"Want a ride to the office? Get out for a bit and go play in town."

"Nah. I've got stuff to do here."

Tenchi shook his head.

"All right. I'll be late today, but make sure you eat."

"Yeah, got it."

Watching his father's car drive away, Tenchi was suddenly struck by a rush of regret.

Let's go somewhere.

Somewhere noisy where I won't have to think or remember anything.

Worry about tomorrow tomorrow.

Tenchi left the fields and headed home at a quick pace.

"It's strange without Azaka and Kamidake here," he muttered.

The paper delivery guy must have been confused too.

He'd just vowed to stop remembering things for a moment, but Tenchi stopped and remembered the figures of Ayeka and her guardians disappearing into the pillar of light.

"Stop, stop."

He kept talking to himself as he went inside.

The house was perfectly still.

"Ryo-Ohki? Misoka?"

They weren't in the living room or kitchen, so Tenchi figured his dad had let them outside.

"Where did I put my wallet?"

He dashed upstairs and looked in his room.

"Maybe I left it downstairs somewhere."

Times like this, if Ayeka or Sasami were here, they'd find it right away for me, he thought as he came back downstairs.

"Oh, there it is."

He found his wallet on the corner of the table and picked it up, turned to leave—and glanced back.

"Ayeka..."

Have a lovely time, Lord Tenchi.

Ayeka was there, smiling at him—a vision almost too vivid to call an illusion, and his feet froze for just a moment.

Have a lovely time, welcome home, be careful—

He'd been leaning on those gentle words as if they were only natural, living each day in easy comfort.

Tenchi-niichan, can you help with my homework?

Tenchi, let's go somewhere fun together.

Sasami's bright smile and Ryoko's mischievous look chased him like ghosts.

"I can't do this..."

Tenchi fled out the door and ran for the bus stop.

What if they all never came back?

Ayeka and Sasami, Ryoko, Washu, George.

What would I even do?

Living in that house where happy memories floated around like ghosts.

Would I just wait?

Is that all I could do?

Wait and believe that eventually, as if nothing had happened at all, everything would go back to normal?

With no answer forthcoming, Tenchi caught his breath and waited for the bus to town.

"Something is strange. What is the matter with Lord Tenchi?"

In her room at the Juraian royal palace, Ayeka had been trying the ansible and now sighed as she cut the connection.

"Isn't Tenchi-niichan there?"

Sasami was listlessly kicking the table leg and tilting her head.

"What time is it there? Sis, you didn't get the time wrong, did you?"

"He must be in the fields. Tenchi-niichan isn't waiting in front of the ansible all day."

Sasami muttered to herself and picked up her Game Boy again.

"This is boring. Sis, when can we go back?"

"I'm working on the calculation—just a minute."

Ayeka furrowed her brow and redid the mental math.

"There's a time difference between Earth and Jurai, so let me see..."

"I wonder how Ryo-chan is. I wonder if Misoka-chan is okay. Hey, if Tenchi-niichan picks up, let me talk to him later."

"Yes, yes, I know."

Ayeka tried the ansible again, but the screen just showed an empty lab.

"He really doesn't seem to be there."

She cut the connection with a sigh in her heart.

Even Washu and George aren't there... gone since morning—could something have happened?

Could something have happened to Lord Tenchi?

Or Ryoko?

Growing suspicious, Ayeka was so caught up in her thoughts that she didn't notice Lady Misaki had come through the door.

"Shall we have some tea, Ayeka?"

"Oh, Lady Misaki."

Ayeka spun around, startled, and her cheeks went bright red.

"What's the matter? A secret conversation?"

Lady Misaki's eyes went wide in surprise.

"N-no, nothing of the sort."

Ayeka pushed Lady Misaki out of the room ahead of herself.

On the terrace overlooking a splendid courtyard, Ayeka and Sasami sat across from the two imperial consorts enjoying an elegant afternoon.

"Would you like another cup, Ayeka?"

"Thank you."

Ayeka gazed absently at Lady Funaho pouring tea into her cup.

At home, I would be pouring tea for Lord Tenchi like this... I wonder what he's doing right now?

"You're thinking about Lord Tenchi, aren't you?"

"Lady Misaki?"

Ayeka looked up with a start.

"It's written on your face. 'I wonder how Lord Tenchi is doing, I wonder where he went, why do I keep calling and he doesn't call back?'"

"Mom, that's amazing!" Sasami leaned forward.

"Can you tell what Sasami is thinking?"

"Of course." Lady Misaki smiled.

"You're thinking: when can we go home, what is everyone at school up to, how are Ryo-chan and Misoka-chan doing—right?"

"Correct!" Sasami rang out the victory chime.

"There's one more. When is Father coming home?"

"Well..." Lady Misaki said.

"Lady Misaki!"

Her tone had been far too breezy, and Ayeka couldn't help speaking up.

"How can you be so calm? What if Father never comes back? Even without that, I keep hearing things..."

"Yes, I know," Lady Misaki and Lady Funaho said, glancing at each other and smiling.

"If anyone has something to say, they should say it to our faces."

"But..."

Ayeka was flustered.

"What will happen to the Juraian toysl family? With Father, head of the Masaki line, missing, it becomes a matter of responsibility!"

"Ayeka dear," Lady Misaki said, leaning toward her earnest daughter.

"If you're that worried, would you like to take over as heir?"

"What?"

"It's simple. If you're worried about Lord Tenchi, bring him here to Jurai and hold a wedding. That would make you the de facto successor. We'd serve as regents, and the two of you could govern Jurai as a young couple."

"But that's..."

Ayeka was at a loss and turned to Lady Funaho for help.

"That's also a nice option—if Lord Tenchi agrees."

"Lady Funaho!"

"What do you want, Ayeka?"

Cornered by the two consorts, Ayeka froze, unable to respond.

"W-well, Father hasn't returned yet, so..."

"Your father went missing of his own accord. He can hardly object after the fact."

Lady Misaki and Lady Funaho glanced at each other and smiled.

"Ayeka, do as you wish. If you want to go back to Earth, go. You're not bound by duty to the total of 0amily or to us. My wish is for you and Sasami to be happy. So—think carefully."

"We can go back to Earth?" Sasami's eyes lit up and she broke in.

"Sasami's going right away! I want to go to school!"

"No!" Ayeka cut in with an intensity that shocked Sasami.

"Going back to Earth alone is absolutely out of the question! Sasami, you are still a child. Not without your sister!"

"Why? Nobuyuki-uncle is there, and Yosho-brother. Even Tenchi-niichan. There's nothing dangerous!"

Sasami resisted boldly.

"Even so, it's not allowed. What do you think people would say if Sasami went back alone, about your sister, and your mothers?"

"....."

Even Sasami couldn't argue with that.

She looked down, bit her lip, and began tracing the floor pattern with her shoe.

Lady Misaki and Lady Funaho exchanged a look but said nothing.

They knew very well that nothing said would matter until Ayeka reached her own conclusion.

"Thank you for the tea. I'll return to my room."

Ayeka rose, bowing with elegant grace while inwardly regretting having yelled at her little sister.

"I'll hold on to poor Sasami," Lady Funaho said with a laugh and a bow in return.

And now, at Convenience Store Three Stars.

"Let's see—that comes to one thousand four hundred and ninety-six yen. Thank you so much!"

Ryoko, wearing an Anna Miller's-style apron that emphasized her already-ample chest, her miniskirt showing off shapely legs without the slightest embarrassment, was cheerfully beaming at customers.

"Come back again! ♡"

Even treating them to a heart at the end.

The young man of college-student age—who had been coming in every day since Miho-Kiyo had worked at the register—left with a broad grin.

"Ryoko's something else," Satoshi murmured admiringly, watching the new face of the store from behind a shelf.

"No one would ever guess this is that wild space pirate."

Once, back in the day, Ryoko had given a live performance in front of Three Stars with Satoshi's guitar that had the whole neighborhood watching with their jaws dropped.

When a lull in customers appeared, Ryoko stepped away from the register.

"Hey, Satoshi—working part-time is actually pretty fun. For such easy work, seven hundred yen an hour? Miho-Kiyo had it made."

"Ryoko-san is special," Satoshi answered, making a deliberate effort to keep his gaze from drifting downward.

"But you know, if you drink and eat as much as you earn, the money won't pile up."

"What, are you gonna give me free booze and bento boxes?"

Ryoko's eyes lit up.

"I don't care about making piddly little wages, I just thought I'd at least spend it in your store. So with the leftover, I'll go drink somewhere else."

"Then I'm losing out," Satoshi laughed, retreating into the storeroom.

"But I guess I really should be paying Ryoko-san a security deposit too. Just having you staying here overnight means I don't have to worry about burglars—that's a huge help."

"Tch... smooth talker."

Ryoko clicked her tongue and grinned despite herself.

"All right, I'm hungry. Satoshi—take over the register so I can eat."

"Oh, is it that time? Sure, eat whatever you like."

Ryoko went to stand in front of the bento section and picked up three different bento boxes.

"Where shall I eat today?"

The park? Some building's rooftop?

Then, as if struck by a good idea, a smile spread across Ryoko's face.

"Just stepping out!"

No sooner said than Ryoko's figure disappeared.

"Oh..."

Satoshi looked around the store instinctively, but fortunately no customers seemed to have noticed.

"This is what she's like. No wonder Dad's not thrilled."

But I personally am super happy getting to be around Ryoko-san every day...

Satoshi conjured the image of Ryoko in her miniskirt with a dreamy expression.

That great figure... the way her waist goes in like this, and her chest is like that...

"Hey, Satoshi!" The store manager, Yuujirou Hoshiura, smacked his daydreaming son on the back of the head.

"Why are you grinning at the register like that? Stop making that embarrassing face!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Satoshi cheerfully pushed a hand through his gold hair and swept his gaze over the poor earthlings before him.

"I'm hooome..."

Ryoko teleported into the Masaki house in an instant and looked around the quiet living room, tilting her head.

"That's odd—is nobody here?"

Ryoko checked Washu's lab, Tenchi's room, the bathroom and the sky-hot-spring, made her rounds of the garden and Masaki Shrine, and teleported back to the living room.

"I went to the trouble of bringing bento, too."

Ryoko made a sulky face and opened the fridge, chugging from a PET bottle of barley tea before settling on the sofa to eat.

Then there came a scratching sound at the sliding glass door.

"Myah..."

"Oh, it's you. Don't be shy, come on in."

She said it without even looking, but when Ryo-Ohki showed no signs of coming in, Ryoko got up and slid the door open.

"So you've got the little kitten too. Fair enough, I guess."

The calico kitten and Ryo-Ohki shot in the moment the door opened and immediately began sniffing at Ryoko's bento.

"You want some too? Here."

Placing some side dishes on the plastic bento lid for them, Ryoko felt somewhat puzzled.

"You haven't eaten, have you?"

What's Tenchi doing... she felt indignant on his behalf, while hypocritically forgetting her own behavior.

And then—the soft tinkling sound rang out.

The beetle-shaped terminal flew close to Ryoko and announced an incoming ansible call.

"Yeah? Okay."

When the beetle moved away having done its job, Ryoko gave a broad, satisfied grin.

"Perfect timing. I was dying of boredom."

Ryoko picked up her half-eaten bento and went into Washu's lab.

"Lord Tenchi! Where were you—oh, Ryoko!?"

Ayeka on the screen went wide-eyed seeing Ryoko walk in.

"Hey, Ayeka. Long time no see."

"What... what are you wearing??"

Ayeka stared at Ryoko's outfit in astonishment.

How? When did this person turn into such a sugary type!?

"You looking for Tenchi?"

Ayeka snapped back.

"Ryoko, where is Lord Tenchi? I called this morning and no one answered."

"Tenchi, you say..."

Ryoko narrowed her eyes and nodded meaningfully.

"He can't come to the ansible right now. I'll take a message."

"What happened? Is he ill again?"

"Nothing like that."

Ryoko draped her elegant legs over the armrest of Washu's chair and recrossed them.

"Just say it plainly. What on earth is wrong with Lord Tenchi?"

Ayeka's tone was growing sharper.

"Oh, Ayeka—you really don't get it, do you?"

Ryoko's grin reached nearly to her ears.

"I'd think if someone said they 'can't come to the ansible right now,' you'd normally catch my drift. Well, maybe not—so I'll tell you. Tenchi and I have been living a life of love together."

"A l-life of love!?"

Ayeka was speechless, eyes going wide.

"Yep, Tenchi says—"

Ryoko started gleefully spinning the story.

"—he likes me dressed like this. Doesn't matter to me what I wear, but I can't exactly go naked, can I? I said bare skin with an apron would be fine by me, but Tenchi said that would be too embarrassing."

She snuck a glance at Ayeka's reaction.

"So for cooking I need at least this much, right? And Tenchi said—"

"R-Ryoko..."

Ayeka barely managed to push out a sound.

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Tears were even forming from the shock.

"So what I'm saying is—stop calling so much. Right now he rushed to put on his clothes so he's probably forgotten to put on his underwear."

Ryoko carefully made sure Ayeka couldn't see as she lifted the hem of her miniskirt.

"That is quite enough!!"

With a snap, the ansible cut off from the other side.

Ryoko sat there alone, laughing to herself at the darkened screen—then suddenly stopped laughing and began eating the rest of her bento as if taking out her frustrations.

"Nothing like that could happen... idiot..."

Ryoko muttered, then tossed the empty bento box in the disposal and walked out of the lab.

"Awful person..."

She came into the living room and Ryo-Ohki and the kitten immediately ran up to her.

"There, there—you two get along."

Even for the normally unflappable Ryoko, sitting in an empty living room started to get to her.

"Damn it... if you don't come back soon, I'll make the story actually true!"

Ryoko whispered in the direction of the galaxy where Ayeka was, then disappeared.

In her room at the Jurai imperial palace, Ayeka sat staring blankly at the darkened ansible screen. The phrase "life of love" was rampaging through her head.

"A life of love... a LIFE OF LOVE!?"

Adrenaline surging, Juraian power crackling through to her fingertips.

"How dare she, when I am suffering so much! What does that awful woman think she is!?"

It's a lie, it has to be a lie!

Lord Tenchi would never do such a thing!

But then why was Ryoko dressed like that?

Questions flashed in rapid succession in her mind, and Ayeka burst out of her room looking for her loyal guardians.

"Kyah...!"

Rounding a corridor corner at full speed, she slammed right into someone and sat down hard.

"Princess Ayeka! I do beg your pardon." The tall young man hurriedly extended a hand to help her up.

"Are you all right? I was actually on my way to your room."

"And you are?"

Where have I seen this face before... Ayeka looked up doubtfully at the handsome youth with cool blue hair.

"You don't remember? I'm Tenryou. Tenmu Tenryou."

"Ah..."

She remembered—what an unusual name, she had thought.

"You may not remember me—you were quite small, Princess."

"No, I do remember," Ayeka said.

A faint childhood memory rose to the surface.

"When I got lost in the vast imperial mausoleum, you helped me find my way back, if I recall."

"I was still just a boy then," Tenryou said with a bashful smile.

"I'm honored that you remember. After that I was away from the imperial court for a long time, studying at the Galaxy Academy. But when my father, who served as the keeper of the imperial mausoleum, passed away, I came back."

"I see..."

The unexpected reunion had nearly made Ayeka forget all about Ryoko, but she barely caught herself.

"I mustn't dawdle. Tenryou, I'm terribly sorry, but I'm in a hurry. Perhaps we could have tea together later."

She reached the earlier terrace, confirmed no one was there, then summoned her guardians.

"Azaka! Kamidake!"

"As you wish."

The two guardians appeared at once.

"I have a critical mission for you. Take a royal ship to Earth now and bring Lord Tenchi here. No matter what Lord Tenchi may say, you are not to listen. Do you understand? You must bring him back."

"As you wish!"

The two guardians answered in perfect unison.

"However—this is rather sudden."

"You need not ask questions. Go!"

Azaka and Kamidake looked at Ayeka's expression, fell silent, and disappeared.

"Yes... this is the only right thing to do!"

Ayeka pressed her lips together, silently banishing Ryoko's smirking face.

At that moment, at the Masaki household, the exhausted Tenchi had just returned from a day of wandering aimlessly through the city and was sliding open the front door.

Chapter Four:

"I Hate You, Sister!"

"I hate you, Sister!"

Sasami lay with her head on Lady Misaki's knee, gazing vaguely at the garden misted with the night bath steam.

"You never listen to what Sasami wants in the end."

"It's been so long... bathing together like this, Sasami."

Lady Misaki sat on the edge of the vast open-air bath, gently stroking Sasami's wet hair.

"Hey, Sasami. Why don't we pack a lunch and take a walk tomorrow? There are white lilies blooming in the mountains."

"Lilies? Do they have lilies on Jurai?"

Sasami and Lady Misaki looked at each other.

"Jurai and Earth really are alike, aren't they."

"They are. Both planets of trees and greenery."

"Building houses of wood. Even wooden ships—they don't fly, though."

Sasami began counting on her fingers.

"Wooden bowls. Wooden chopsticks. Wooden desks and chairs, wooden footwear. Tenchi-niichan's house has lots of things made of wood too."

"Jurai has them too. Wooden utensils, wooden furniture, wooden transfer devices, wooden networks, wooden information-processing systems."

Lady Misaki's voice wrapped around Sasami like a lullaby.

Sasami, why are you talking about such boring things... another version of herself muttered impatiently inside.

This isn't what I want to tell Lady Misaki.

Sasami got out of the bath and sat beside Lady Misaki.

The night breeze brushed cool against her flushed skin.

"Sasami..."

"Yes?"

Sasami looked up at the same moment Lady Misaki tilted her head to look gently down at her.

"...Never mind."

Sasami pressed her cheek to Lady Misaki's shoulder and closed her eyes.

I can't say it.

There's no point, is there. Wanting to go back to Earth with Lady Misaki if one isn't enough.

"Can I sleep with you tonight, Lady Misaki?"

"Of course."

Lady Misaki smiled and wrapped her arm around her daughter.

I don't know what to do about Ayeka being so serious... she thought.

She doesn't even know what's most important to her.

The answer is... just one thing. There's only one answer.

If she removes things she doesn't need one by one, that single answer should be all that's left.

"It's getting cold. Shall we sleep?"

"Yes, Lady Misaki."

Sasami stood up obediently.

"Don't make that face. Everything will work out, I'm sure."

"Lady Misaki..."

Sasami hurriedly rubbed her face.

"Did Sasami have an awful face? Like a bad girl?"

"No, not at all. It's just that if you look sad, your heart gets dark too. So quit all right?"

Lady Misaki draped a bath robe over her troubled daughter's small shoulders, and squeezed her tight for good measure.

"Sorry, Ryo-Ohki. You must be hungry," Tenchi said.

He stacked up a pile of carrots on Ryo-Ohki's dish and heaped cat food on the kitten's.

"What did you get up to today? Did you go out somewhere to play?"

"Myah..."

Ryo-Ohki glanced up briefly, then went back to concentrating on the carrots.

"You know, looking at you like this, you really do seem like a normal pet..."

Impossible to believe she's a spaceship, he thought internally.

"I wonder how Ayeka is doing."

Sasami must be lonely too...

"You've got it easy, you two—not a care in the world. I'm so lonely at home I can't stay here."

Talking to no one but the kitten, Tenchi murmured quietly.

"Maybe I'll call Ayeka."

Tenchi stood up, walked to Washu's lab door and reached for the handle—then stopped.

He could feel the momentum that had built up in him deflate on its own.

He sighed and gave up.

"What am I doing?"

And there, the phone in the front hallway caught his eye.

Tenchi pressed his lips together and started dialing.

"Yes, Three Stars... oh, is that you, Tenchi?"

Yuujirou Hoshiura's voice came from the other end.

"She clocked out a bit ago and went for drinks with my son Satoshi... yeah, today was busy, so I said I'd take care of the rest. She's really been a help, I tell you. Really grateful. Anything I can do for you?"

Murmuring "no, it's fine" Tenchi hung up, feeling drained.

"...Maybe I'll take a bath."

She went out for drinks with Satoshi?!

Tenchi muttered the words over and back in his head, strangely annoyed.

What the heck, Ryoko's having the time of her life.

She doesn't care one bit about me.

Sure, of course—she's just fine as long as she's happy.

Who cares about anyone else.

As he kept turning it over, his frustration kept growing.

Tenchi dashed up to his room, grabbed a change of clothes, came back down and shoved his feet into his sneakers and headed outside barefoot.

He went around to the back garden to head for the sky-hot-spring.

It was then.

There was a sound like the air tearing—and above the pond, an unfamiliar ship appeared.

"Could it be..."

Ayeka!?

From the silhouette it looked like a Juraian ship.

The ship halted just above the water's surface of the pond and its underside began to glow.

"Lord Tenchi!"

"It's been a while!"

With the voices, two log-shaped objects materialized on either side of Tenchi in the air.

"Azaka!? Kamidake!?"

"Indeed."

"You look rather low on energy."

"What are you two doing here?"

Azaka and Kamidake's jeweled tops flashed, exchanging what seemed like a glance.

"Is the house locked up?"

"Locked? Dad hasn't come home yet so I put the latch on the front door—"

Tenchi answered skeptically.

"What's going on, you two? Where's Ayeka?"

And then Azaka and Kamidake's jewels flashed again, and a column-shaped barrier surrounded Tenchi's body.

"Wha-what!?"

"Lord Tenchi, forgive us!"

"By royal decree!"

By the time Tenchi realized something was wrong, his body was firmly enclosed in the barrier.

"Azaka! Kamidake!?"

There was no answer.

In the next instant, Tenchi's figure vanished along with the barrier, and Azaka and Kamidake disappeared as well.

The Juraian ship rose again from above the pond, ascended vertically to the sky above the pond, then abruptly changed course and plunged into a rift in space.

"Myah!?"

By the time Ryo-Ohki, who had sensed that something was wrong, flew to the window, it was all over. The pond's surface reflected the midnight moon as if nothing had happened.

Now then—at the Jurai royal palace.

"Princess Ayeka, we have brought Lord Tenchi as ordered."

A communication came in from Azaka via Ansible.

"We applied time-freeze to shield him from the shock of the space jump."

"Well done. Enter through the royal family’s exclusive port. I will wait for you there."

"As you wish."

The communication cut off.

"It's time."

Ayeka murmured to the version of herself in the mirror, leaning in to look closely.

Brows drawn in graceful arcs, subtle shadows and highlights giving an added distinction to already refined features.

The makeup was kept quite subtle overall to set off her deep crimson eyes.

The kimono was not formal dress, but an elegant silver-white and pale green with deep crimson accents matching her eyes.

"Perfect."

Ayeka smiled with deep satisfaction and stepped away from the mirror.

The exclusive port for the Juraian royal family was on the top floor of the palace, normally unmanned.

The royal family's ships read the operator's will directly, requiring no assistance.

"Lord Tenchi, I'm coming now."

Ayeka left her room and stepped into the transfer block that led to the top floor.

"...Huh?"

Why am I on the bridge of the Ryu-Oh?

"Lord Tenchi, are you awake?"

"We most humbly beg your forgiveness for the earlier unpleasantness."

Two close-up faces of Azaka and Kamidake peered down at the still-dazed Tenchi.

"Wah!?"

Wide awake now.

The somewhat Japanese-modern equipment and devices around him were indeed a ship's bridge—but not the Ryu-Oh.

"This is...? Where am I?"

Azaka and Kamidake's jeweled tops flashed.

"Explanations will follow."

"For now, if you'll come down, all will become clear."

"..... ?"

Tenchi remained suspicious but followed Kamidake's guidance and started down the boarding ramp.

"Hey, what's going on—"

At that moment.

"Lord Tenchi!!"

From the far side of a vast hall, a woman came running with her kimono hem flaring out.

Lustrous black hair, slender legs—and the familiar, longed-for voice he had thought he'd never hear again.

"Ayeka!?"

Without thinking, Tenchi ran and caught Ayeka in his arms.

"Lord Tenchi, I'm so sorry..."

Ayeka's words faltered.

"Ayeka!"

Tenchi had barely heard what she said.

Perhaps hadn't been able to hear it.

Before every question, the reality that Ayeka was in his arms— thereal Ayeka, not a dream, the Ayeka he was holding in these arms—had swept all questions away.

"I missed you..."

"Me too..."

Tenchi and Ayeka held each other for a moment, then gradually came back to themselves.

"It's not a dream, is it?"

He ran his fingers lightly along her cheek to confirm.

"It's not a dream."

Ayeka's cheeks turned pink.

"It was my doing. I instructed Azaka and Kamidake... to bring Lord Tenchi to me."

"So this place is—Jurai?"

"Yes."

Ayeka finally regained her composure, and smiled.

"I thought if I didn't do something like this, I would never see Lord Tenchi again."

"So you basically kidnapped me?"

The moment Tenchi felt relief, his strength nearly gave out.

Right... so that was it.

A smile rose naturally to his lips.

"Ayeka, you're bold, you know. You seem so quiet usually, but sometimes you do the most unbelievable things."

"I'm sorry. I... I wanted to see Lord Tenchi so badly, I couldn't stand still anymore, and this was the only way I could think of."

"You shocked me. It was so sudden."

Tenchi and Ayeka spoke over each other, unable to wait for the other to finish. They looked at each other and smiled, a little shyly.

"I'm glad. You look well, Ayeka... how is Sasami?"

"She's being put to bed by Lady Misaki."

"Emperor Azusa... your father—has he been found?"

"Not yet..."

Ayeka smiled with a faint shyness.

"Shall we go downstairs? Would you like some tea in the courtyard?"

"Sure..."

Tenchi hesitated.

What's wrong with me... I was kidnapped against my will, yet I can't bring myself to be angry at all.

I'm just ridiculously happy.

No—not even happy. I'm moved.

That Ayeka cared this much about me...

Tenchi was genuinely embarrassed and quietly followed Ayeka.

"Ayeka."

"Yes?"

The reply came back instantly, just as it would at home on Earth.

"Never mind."

You're beautiful... after all, for me, Ayeka is...

He could feel his heart pounding impossibly harder, all on its own.

"Oh—I have to contact Dad. I came out without a word, so he must be worried. Partly thanks to a certain someone."

"I'm sorry."

Ayeka apologized for the third time, but her expression sparkled with amusement—she didn't really look sorry at all.

"Does Uncle Nobuyuki know how to use the ansible?"

"No."

"Then I'll send Azaka or Kamidake as a messenger."

"No, wait a moment. Springing it on him like that will give him a heart attack."

It's going to be a shock either way...

Tenchi felt a little embarrassed remembering how flustered and irritable he'd been for the last few days.

"Can you reach Grandpa?"

"Yosho-niisama? Of course."

"Then I'll call Grandpa. And tell him that Ayeka sent an escort for me and I'm over here."

"Such a strange Lord Tenchi."

Not knowing Tenchi's inner turmoil, Ayeka laughed freely.

"Very well. Please call from my room."

"Thanks."

Tenchi gave a relieved smile.

At the Masaki Shrine office at that same moment, a person who had absolutely no business being there sat with arms folded and a sour expression surveying the cramped room.

"Yosho. Do you truly intend to spend the rest of your days buried on this planet?!"

"That's a complicated topic... would you like some tea? I'm afraid we're out of sweets, I apologize."

"Who is talking about sweets!?"

Seated across from Katsuhito—or Yosho, as he was known in Jurai—legs crossed, drinking bitter tea with a sour face, was none other than Emperor of Jurai himself.

"I have to say, though—I was surprised. When you showed up out of the blue last night. I'll refrain from investigating further into the details, but this time I had quite a lot to think about. After all— you're missing, as far as anyone knows."

"That's just how others saw it."

Emperor Azusa glared at his composed elderly son and furrowed his brow.

"I knew perfectly well where I was going the whole time."

"My, my—no wonder Lady Funaho and Ayeka have their hands full."

Katsuhito muttered under his breath.

"What? If you have something to say, say it plainly."

"Why are you always in such a rush?"

Katsuhito unhurriedly drank his tea, maddening the already short-tempered Azusa to the brink.

"If I may say so—Ayeka only just turned twenty. From your perspective she may be seven hundred and twenty, but that child spent almost all of those seven hundred years in time-freeze aboard the Ryu-Oh. Looking for me. She came to this planet and was finally freed from the curse of being the betrothed of a brother in name only, just beginning her own youth. With a partner her own honest maiden heart chose—not one assigned to her. Isn't that touching? And yet you keep saying come back, or I'll choose Ayeka's partner myself..."

"I never said anything of the sort."

Azusa was disgruntled.

"Poor Ayeka—she and Sasami had no choice but to come back to Jurai."

"It's a matter of great urgency for the royal family. Naturally."

He glared back, refusing to be outmaneuvered by his son.

"Even for something you deliberately went missing for? Terribly inconvenient."

"I'm not inconvenienced at all."

Azusa began to feel more and more as if he were talking to an elderly family retainer.

"There seems to be some misunderstanding, but my reason for leaving Jurai was far more political. An emperor must always be sensitive to internal and external movements. When troublemakers think the way is clear and start to show their true colors, it's an excellent opportunity to identify them."

"Lady Funaho knows all about them already, you know."

Katsuhito, surprisingly well-informed about internal and external affairs for someone living on an outlying planet, parried the comment effortlessly.

"Fortunately, with the two Ladies governing Jurai so firmly, there hasn't been any major disruption and things seem quite stable..."

He shot a glance at Azusa.

"Why not simply admit it? That you couldn't put up with your two daughters—who were supposed to be under your thumb—being so completely wrapped up in their housekeeping duties on some faraway planet."

"Hmm, hmm, hmm..."

A vein throbbed at Azusa's temple.

It appeared the Emperor of Jurai was a rather honest man in private.

Then the ansible chime sounded.

Azusa was so startled he nearly leapt to his feet, and Katsuhito—for once—was caught off guard and showed a flash of genuine surprise.

"Yes, yes, I'll answer..."

He composed himself and turned to the monitor.

"Yosho-niisama!"

Ayeka's happy face appeared on screen.

"Oh, is that you."

Yosho managed an inward wince and smiled.

"How are things over there? Has Father been found?"

He casually shifted the monitor's angle as he spoke.

"Not yet, but... um..."

Ayeka hesitated.

"I wanted to ask you to pass on a message to uncle Nobuyuki. It's about Lord Tenchi..."

"Yes, what about Tenchi?"

"Actually, he's here."

Ayeka slipped back, and in her place appeared Tenchi with a somewhat sheepish grin.

"Grandpa, I... Azaka and Kamidake kind of grabbed me. So I'm on Jurai—could you let Dad know not to worry?"

"Tenchi!?"

Katsuhito stared at Tenchi in exasperation, thinking to himself: easier done than said.

"Oh, and also—could you look after Ryo-Ohki and Misoka?"

"Put Ayeka back on."

"Oh, sure."

Ayeka appeared on screen again.

"Brother, I'm so sorry. I... I simply had to see Lord Tenchi."

Not a word about Ryoko's teasing.

"Selfish as it is—I'd like to have him stay here for a while. Is that all right?"

"I suppose saying no won't make much difference."

Katsuhito gave a wry smile, thinking: what would happen if I just tilted this monitor a little...

"All right, I'll pass along what you said to Nobuyuki. Give my regards to the Ladies."

"Thank you. I'll contact you again."

Ayeka smiled brightly and cut the transmission.

"Well, there you have it, Father."

Turning around, Katsuhito almost burst out laughing at Azusa's expression.

On Azusa's face, invisible words spelled out: Damn, foiled!

"Of all the..."

The hapless Emperor of Jurai had grasped that his plan had backfired completely.

The emperor of Jurai goes missing. His beloved daughters rush back. An emotional reunion. After that, he'd find some excuse to keep them on Jurai.

Ayeka would cry, so there he'd show his imperial magnanimity and then summon the young man.

First he'd train him in martial arts as befitting a member of the Royal family, polish him up, and keep him under strict supervision until he measured up as worthy of Ayeka.

Of course, all contact would require prior authorization.

There was no way he was handing his daughter over for free.

"I've been outmaneuvered."

The Emperor murmured.

It was because he hadn't factored in the single-minded love of his grown daughter.

"...I'm returning to Jurai."

Azusa stood up with the face of a man near death, and without a word walked out of the shrine office.

"Are you tired, Lord Tenchi?"

In a small gazebo sinking into the dark, Tenchi and Ayeka sat side by side looking up at a sky thick with stars.

Different constellations from Earth, two unfamiliar moons—one pale blue, one faintly red.

"Not at all."

Tenchi breathed in the deep nighttime fragrance.

A thick scent of greenery.

Unknown vividly-colored flowers bloomed around them.

The air, mingling the honey-sweet scent of flowers with the smell of green, was moist and cool and seemed to softly dissolve the veils of the heart.

"I couldn't stay in the house."

Tenchi murmured.

"When Ayeka left, and Sasami, and Washu and George—it felt like the house was empty."

"Washu too?"

"She was invited to give a series of lectures at the Galaxy Academy. Kiyone and Mihoshi went back to the Galaxy Police."

And Ryoko left too... he added to himself with a bitter feeling.

"My goodness..."

Ayeka's eyes went wide.

"Is it my fault? Because I and Sasami came back?"

Ayeka looked down.

"I had no idea that was happening. I'm so sorry, Lord Tenchi. To be alone and in pain..."

"That's not true."

He cut her off abruptly, and Ayeka looked up at him in surprise.

"You were the one who went through the hardest time of all, weren't you? I just floundered around and in the end couldn't do a single thing..."

"That's not so!" Now it was Ayeka's turn to interrupt.

"Going through this incident showed me just how much I had been relying on Lord Tenchi. Because you were there, I could keep going. Every day, laughing over little things, getting angry over little things... I was happy."

Ayeka's eyes shimmered.

"I don't want to be apart. I couldn't bear even a single second. Lord Tenchi—hold me! Don't let go!"

"Ayeka..."

Tenchi's hand reached her shoulder—and she was pulled close.

A breathtaking joy filled Ayeka, and she closed her eyes, trembling at the beloved scent.

Ah—the smell of Earth... the warm autumn sunlight, the smell of the fields and greenery, the smell of Lord Tenchi.

"I love you..."

After that, words couldn't come.

Tears from Ayeka's closed eyes traced her cheeks and dampened Tenchi's collar.

"Don't go. Stay here... don't leave me."

"Ayeka?"

The moonlight—slightly brighter than on Earth—lit up the tears gleaming on Ayeka's cheeks.

"Are you crying?"

In the moment their eyes met—Jurai's deep crimson and Earth's black—it happened naturally.

Trembling to the depths of his soul, Tenchi kissed Ayeka and held her close, gently, as if wrapping something fragile.

"Lord Tenchi..."

The gazebo bench was cool and hard, and the lovers' bed made a point of staying silent.

"Just for a little... stay with me just a little longer."

Two moons lit the face white as the lilies said to bloom on Jurai, and wavered with what might have been shy modesty.

Tenchi, drunk on the moonlight, held Ayeka close and kissed her lips once more.

When he let his fingers touch her moon-lit cheek, a cherry blossom suddenly swirled through his mind's eye and a white shadow passed.

I'm sorry, Ryoko...

Behind his closed eyes, white petals swirled again and again, fell on a white carpet, and were swept up and scattered.

I might never see you again.

Pushing away Ryoko's image—the parting that had never been properly made—forcing it away, Tenchi held Ayeka close and drove out the words that threatened to overflow.

"Right now, all I want is to think only of you."

"Lord Tenchi."

And at that moment, a phantom girl passed through Tenchi's mind.

So this was the change in fate, the great change coming—was it this?

Human hearts... mine, Ayeka's, Ryoko's—they were all moving, pulling apart, searching an invisible future and beginning to walk.

Now, if I turn this knob in my hand, there will be no going back.

The door to the future...

Still holding Ayeka, Tenchi strained to hear the whisper of the shadows wandering through Jurai's night.

The whisper of the shadows only unsettled his heart, tossing his thoughts about.

"Yes... hold tight to what is most precious. As I once did—following Azusa-sama, leaving everything behind."

The moonlight grazed the profile of a shadow on the terrace and moved on.

Lady Funaho, smiling, drew back behind a pillar and left the courtyard without a sound, not so much as the rustle of clothing.

"That Tenchi..."

In the far-flung corner of the Earth, in a small shopping street, in the corner of a tiny pub in that shopping street, Ryoko clutched a second one-shou bottle and murmured in a small voice.

Her golden eyes were not smiling.

Hard and clear as topaz, trapping the light, they stared at the dark table surface.

"Ryoko-san, you'll poison yourself drinking that much," Satoshi, who had claimed he was going to drink the whole pub dry but in reality couldn't drink all that much, looked worriedly at the newly silent Ryoko.

"Something happened, right? Tell me about it. I'll do anything for you, Ryoko-san."

"Mm? Then pour me another. The night's still young."

Ryoko shoved her cup toward Satoshi.

"No way." Satoshi took the bottle and hid it under the table.

"Let's get some fresh air. Excuse us, check please!"

Thank goodness I brought enough money... he breathed inwardly in relief.

"Come on, let's go."

"Mm..."

Ryoko walked out of the pub without a stumble, at her usual pace.

Satoshi walked behind her toward the nearby park, Ryoko silent the whole way.

"Can't get drunk," she said quietly.

"Dropped my metabolism to its lowest, trying to empty my head... and still."

Once they entered the small park, Ryoko turned and grinned.

"Sorry, Satoshi. Sorry to drag you along."

"Why? Just being near you makes me happy. Today I feel like I'm floating six inches off the ground."

Satoshi seriously wanted to hug Ryoko, even if he got punched for it.

Her neck and shoulders are so slender.

She's a girl.

It's wrong, Tenchi. Making a girl this sad.

"Hey, Ryoko-san. You should go home and sleep in a proper bed. Even a former space pirate will get bad skin if she doesn't."

"Mind your own business. It's not your face."

Ryoko snapped back in her usual tone—but Satoshi caught the faint shadow that crossed her eyes.

"Hold on just a second. Don't go anywhere, Ryoko-san."

On some impulse, Satoshi ran out of the park and came back a while later with a convenience store bag.

"Here, ice cream!"

Ryoko looked in and found three kinds of Häagen-Dazs cups.

"Don't hold back. I want the dream of going up in your spaceship to come true."

Ryoko stared blankly at Satoshi for a moment, then burst out laughing.

"Right. I did say something like that."

Ryoko laughed to herself as she opened a cup and finished the ice cream in no time.

"You really want to ride a spaceship that much?"

Ryoko's golden eyes sparkled with amusement—and in the same moment, Satoshi was lifted lightly into the air.

For a second the scenery blurred and he nearly lost his balance.

"Ryo-Ohki!"

Ryoko's clear voice rang out, and far below he could see the glimmer of water.

"Myaaaaah!"

Something small glowed on the surface of the water—and then it grew explosively.

"This... this is..."

Face to face with a giant spaceship sporting four impact horns, Satoshi caught his breath and tensed involuntarily.

"Right then, let's go."

Ryoko, her eyes now burning with the fierce light of a pirate, looked down at Satoshi—and in an instant teleported them both to the bridge.

"Tenchi-niicha-an!"

Sasami ran as fast as she could.

The familiar path to school glittered in autumn sunlight.

"Why? How could you?"

I'm going far away. So we won't be able to see each other anymore... Tenchi's voice echoed in her head.

You're still small, Sasami, so I can't take you with me.

Go back to your father and mother.

"How could you!?"

Sasami's chest pounded with anxiety.

Ah... I had a dream like this once, long ago...

The night before Tenchi-niichan rode the Ryu-Oh and went to fight the Dual.

It was a completely different dream but I was scared and lonely and I woke up crying.

It's a dream, right?

When I wake up, I'll be properly at home, right?

At that instant, the surrounding scene changed completely.

"Ah..."

Cherry blossoms. Cherry blossoms everywhere.

On a completely white ground, cherry blossoms were drifting down soundlessly, again and again.

"Tenchi-niichan, where are you?"

Sasami held her breath and looked around.

The feeling of loneliness spread cold all the way to her fingertips.

"No... Sasami doesn't want to be here!"

She tried to cry out when suddenly her eyes snapped open.

"Lady Misaki?"

Sasami stretched out her hand and confirmed that Lady Misaki was sleeping right beside her.

Thank goodness...

Lady Misaki, there's something Sasami wants to tell you... she was about to shake her awake, but stopped.

"It wouldn't be fair to wake her."

I'll have Sis listen instead.

Even when she was small, even after she started living at the Earth house, whenever she had a scary dream she always had Sis listen...

Sasami quietly slipped out of bed and, barefoot, started toward her sister's room.

"Sis?"

Ayeka's room was lit up but empty.

"Where did she go?"

Not knowing what else to do, on her way back through the courtyard, she thought she saw a shadow move near the gazebo.

"Sis?"

Sasami started running through the dewy grass.

Someone's there...!

In the gazebo, her sister was sleeping leaning against Tenchi's shoulder.

"Tenchi... niichan!?"

Her breath caught, and she felt as if the floor had lurched.

"How...?!"

Why is Tenchi-niichan here?

Why didn't you tell Sasami you were coming?

Sis, why didn't you say anything to Sasami?

Why are you sleeping with such a happy look on your face!?

"No...!!"

I shouldn't look. Sasami's still a child...

I shouldn't have come. Sasami has nothing to do with this...!

"I'll never get anyone to listen to my dream again."

Sasami turned on her heel and ran, and the sound of her footsteps made Tenchi open his eyes.

"Sasami!?"

"What!?"

Ayeka snapped awake and watched her little sister's retreating back.

"What should I do? She saw us, didn't she?"

"It's all right. Sasami will understand."

With a strong light in her crimson eyes, Ayeka smiled quietly.

"I love you, Lord Tenchi."

Ayeka lowered her eyes and, resting her body against Tenchi's chest, let out a long, slow breath.

Chapter Five:
"Princess Ayeka, Emergency Press Conference!"

"Princess Ayeka, Emergency Press Conference!"

"Breaking News! The Princess's Secret Finally Revealed!"

"Major Announcement! What Has Happened to the Princess!?"

Jurai was a unified nation.

By Earth's terms, it was as if from the North Pole to the South Pole, all of humanity were citizens of one nation, subjects of the same emperor, a unified people.

And now, every media outlet and network on that vast Jurai was chasing after an explosive piece of news that had suddenly burst onto the scene.

After all, with the emperor away, the first princess of the Jurai royal family was about to appear before all citizens to *********.

What could fill that blank?

A declaration of war?

A pregnancy announcement?

An infidelity scandal?

"I'm telling you, we're under strict orders not to comment on anything! Please wait for the official announcement!"

An Open Letter from the Jurai royal family's public relations department—who until yesterday had been clocking out on time, having tea, meals, and even a drink—shouted back the five hundred and seventy-fourth response to the five hundred and seventy-fourth inquiry.

"I'm definitely handing in my resignation before midnight."

She resolved this inwardly.

Around that time, in the innermost dressing chamber of the Jurai royal palace—accessible to ordinary citizens not at all—Ayeka was bustling around fussing over Tenchi.

"Um, Ayeka..."

"Yes? Does this outfit look more impressive?"

She compared a Jurai traditional costume with geometric patterns in black and navy blue with leaping flames, and another white one with a silver water dragon climbing it—both with distinguished pedigrees.

"That's not what I meant..."

Tenchi eyed nervously a Jurai royal formal dress suit that appeared to be three times his own body width.

"It's all right, leave everything to me. All Lord Tenchi has to do is sit beside me and look dignified."

"But I mean—"

"I. Love. You. ♡"

Ayeka's lips suddenly brushed his cheek and Tenchi's protests dissolved into thin air.

"It's nothing at all, really. I'm just going to introduce you to a few people. All you need to do is nod at what I say. All right?"

Something terrifying was about to begin.

But seeing Ayeka looking this happy, he couldn't possibly interrogate her.

And this was Jurai, not Earth. And it was supposed to be an unofficial press conference...

In the end, Tenchi said nothing and let himself be dressed in the Juraian royal formal attire without resistance, and followed Ayeka out of the room, frozen stiff with anxiety.

The outfit was the one with leaping flames.

"Princess Ayeka has just entered the hall. The young man behind her—the one said to carry the blood of Prince Yosho—is none other than Lord Masaki Tenchi!"

A reporter from the Jurai network said in a voice gone hoarse with excitement.

Tenchi and Ayeka, both in Jurai royal formal dress, sat on the raised platform looking like the royal palace decorations.

To either side of the audience hall—used for official Jurai royal functions—stood members of the four great royal houses. The two royal consorts, Lady Misaki and Lady Funaho, stood behind them, watching over their daughter.

"Your Excellencies, and citizens of Jurai."

Ayeka's clear, carrying voice cut through the hall.

"I, Ayeka, first princess of the Jurai royal family, have long resided on the colonial planet Earth. On hearing of my father, the emperor's, absence, I have returned. What I am about to announce would ordinarily require my father's authority to address, however—"

Ayeka paused and swept the hall with the full dignity of a princess.

Her bearing made it clear that anyone who raised an objection would be ushered out without mercy.

"I, Ayeka, wish to welcome Lord Masaki Tenchi into the Juraian royal family. Carrying the blood of my brother Yosho, a master of our royal house's ultimate technique—The Lighthawk Sword—and blessed by Lady Tsunami—there is no one more fitting for our royal family than Lord Tenchi. I believe meeting Lord Tenchi was my destiny. I swear by this royal blood: there is no one other than Lord Tenchi to whom I would entrust my fate. Of course, everything would come after Father's return..."

A moment's silence—and then the audience hall erupted into uproar like a disturbed beehive.

The members of the assembled houses were stunned, reporters crowded around the platform, and those who couldn't get near the platform tried to get a comment from any member of the royal family they could reach.

"Does this mean you are announcing your engagement to Lord Tenchi?"

"What is the nature of your relationship? Is it true that you are living together?"

"Who proposed? What were the exact words?"

"How many children will you have?"

"A-Ayeka, just a—"

Tenchi went pale while Ayeka began efficiently handling questions from all directions with a radiant smile.

"I'm afraid—" "At this time, I can say no more—" "Please watch over us warmly—" "When Father returns—" "I can't say anything now—"

Cycling through these cards one by one to fend off the reporters, when the allotted time was up she promptly led Tenchi away from the audience hall.

Their backs were guarded by Ladies Funaho and Misaki, so pursuit was impossible.

"Sis is marrying Tenchi-niichan...!?"

Sasami, who had been watching the special broadcast in the palace kitchen with the cooks, nearly fell off her chair.

"No way... Sasami didn't hear anything about this!"

Then she won't go back to Earth?

What about Ryoko-neechan?

What on Earth is Sasami supposed to do!?

"...I'm going to ask Sis!"

Sasami leapt to her feet and ran out of the kitchen without looking back.

"Ayeka! What on earth was that just now!?"

Back in the dressing chamber, Tenchi finally got some color back and rounded on Ayeka.

"You said unofficial! Just a quick introduction! So how did it turn into such a spectacle? This is a problem. I haven't even thought about marriage at all yet!"

"Lord Tenchi!?"

Ayeka opened her eyes wide as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Why? Was holding me in your arms last night a lie? Was kissing me gently a deception!?"

Her deep crimson eyes began to fill.

"I believed in you... Lord Tenchi."

"N-no, that's not it!" Tenchi hurriedly interrupted as a tear fell on Ayeka's cheek.

"What I mean is that felt like an ambush! I looked like an idiot, just sitting there following you around."

"You're toying with my heart!?"

Ayeka didn't let him finish.

"Even after coming this far, you still can't make up your mind? Do you mean to humiliate me? That's awful..."

Ayeka stepped back with a wounded expression, bit her lip, and suddenly turned away.

"You're so cruel, Lord Tenchi!!"

Leaving behind that resentful line, Ayeka ran out of the dressing chamber, leaving a stunned Tenchi behind.

"Why?!"

I'm the one who should feel humiliated.

So how is it that I'm being scolded like some terrible person and then abandoned?

Tenchi muttered angrily, stripping off the royal formal wear he'd just been dressed in and changing back into his usual clothes.

"I'm done with this."

Tenchi muttered with a grim look and walked quickly out of the dressing chamber, stepping into the nearest transfer block.

The top floor—the Juraian royal family’s exclusive port.

He didn't expect to get away smoothly given there were no ships there, but he didn't want to run into anyone and get asked questions or chased around. And besides the dressing chamber, the only places he could think of without many people were the gazebo where he'd spent the night with Ayeka, and the royal family’s exclusive port.

Transfer blocks would bring you to your destination if you simply held it clearly in mind.

A mild dizziness, like being spun around, passed—and Tenchi stepped forward without thinking.

"Hm?"

A familiar door was in front of him.

"It's Ayeka's room..."

Of all places to be brought to—this had to be because he was unusually disoriented.

He couldn't possibly make up with Ayeka right now—Tenchi silently turned on his heel and started back toward the transfer block.

Then he heard a soft sound of a door opening behind him.

(Oh no...!)

Even as he thought it, he couldn't help turning around.

"Tenchi-niichan!"

"Sasami!?"

Tenchi and Sasami stared at each other for a good thirty seconds, rooted to the spot.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

It was Sasami who spoke first.

"Sasami was waiting. I tried so hard to be patient. I wanted to go back to Earth but Sis said I couldn't... I wanted to hear about Ryo-chan and Misoka-chan, and I was worried about everyone. Why didn't you tell me you were here!?"

"Sasami..."

Tenchi was at a loss.

Ayeka suddenly brought me here... she wouldn't let me go... I did think about you, wonder where you were... only excuses ran through his mind.

"Are you going to marry Sis? That's what you'd say, right. Because Sis just said that in front of everyone on Jurai. Then you won't go back to Earth anymore. We can't all eat dinner together or watch fireworks anymore, right? Because you'll marry Sis and be a real Juraian prince and won't be able to play with Sasami anymore. Because Sis will have Lord Tenchi all to herself."

Sasami's bright eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry. Sasami didn't mean to say all this—I was going to say congratulations when I saw you, Tenchi-niichan. Because Sasami..."

Suddenly Sasami clamped her mouth shut and wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

"I'm sorry, Tenchi-niichan. Sasami... is being a bad girl."

It happened in an instant.

Sasami turned and slipped past Tenchi, diving into the transfer block.

"Sasami!?"

While Tenchi hesitated for just a moment, Sasami's figure vanished, and he was left behind again.

What have I done?!

Remembering Sasami's lonely face sent a sharp pain through his chest.

Chasing after her now would be too late.

And he didn't even know where she'd gone.

Besides... what would he say if he did catch up?

That's not it, Sasami. I'm not going to marry Ayeka. I'm not planning to marry anyone. Maybe I'll never get married at all. I just want... to live together with everyone, like a family...

Suddenly, something in his mind ground to a halt.

A lie.

He was lying.

Cornered like this, there was no choice but to marry—that's fine, can't be helped.

Somewhere inside, a part of him thought that.

Even as he pretended to be angry at Ayeka's high-handedness, somewhere there was a self that was actually relieved.

Even now he was only thinking of excuses.

That Ryoko left on her own.

That he was dragged here against his will by Azaka and Kamidake.

With Ayeka saying she loves him so strongly—responding by hurting her beyond recovery would be terrible.

He was afraid.

Afraid of making up his mind.

Afraid of hurting someone.

Where does my heart actually lie?

"I'm the worst..."

Tenchi murmured, trembling.

Tenchi, I love you... Ryoko tackled him with those words.

Lord Tenchi, I love you... Ayeka gazed up at him dreamily.

He loved them both, loved Sasami and Mihoshi and Kiyone and everyone—because he loved them all, he couldn't imagine choosing one. He'd thought that. Tried to think it.

But it was just his selfishness.

He'd always been avoiding anything decisive.

He'd told himself that was kindness—that it was a way of not hurting anyone.

He was just a coward.

"...I'm going home."

Tenchi murmured, and desperately pictured the royal family exclusive port in his mind, then stepped into the transfer block.

The mild dizziness passed, and this time the floor of the port was clearly visible.

He could also see a Jurai ship moored between the enormous pillars.

Tenchi walked slowly across the smooth floor toward the ship.

I'm sorry, Ayeka. Sasami.

He muttered only excuses inwardly.

Could he actually operate the ship alone and get back to Earth? A thought briefly crossed his mind, but he remembered once operating Ayeka's ship—the Ryu-Oh—and Tenchi prepared to call out to the Jurai ship.

"You shall not!"

"Please turn back!"

Suddenly voices rang out, and two guardians appeared to block Tenchi's path.

"Azaka!?"

"By Princess Ayeka's orders, no one may pass beyond this point."

"We would regret having to use force should you attempt to push through."

Kamidake continued.

"Please turn back."

"Why..."

It was useless to ask.

This was Jurai.

There was only one option—using force, wielding the Kokou-Ken to break through.

"Tell Ayeka I'm going home," Tenchi said without giving up.

"I don't mean to force my way through. But I'm wrong to be here. Let me through, Azaka! Kamidake!"

"You must not, Lord Tenchi!"

Azaka and Kamidake flashed their jewels, seeming to exchange a glance.

"Forgive us!"

The two guardians resonated, creating a barrier.

"We humbly beg that you not discard the Princess's feelings!"

"Let me through! I don't intend to marry Ayeka!"

Light gathered in Tenchi's hand, and the Kokou-Ken appeared.

"What!?"

The barrier wavered for an instant.

Tenchi raised the Kokou-Ken straight in front of his forehead, and charged directly between Azaka and Kamidake.

At that moment.

The ceiling of the vast hall opened with a low mechanical hum, and a large ship at least three times the size of the one Tenchi had arrived in descended.

"His Majesty Azusa!?"

A panicked voice from Azaka behind him—and immediately the two guardians shot past Tenchi.

The massive ship settled into position with precise accuracy, and from inside a single man emerged.

"Emperor Jurai...?"

Azusa ignored the greeting guardians and walked toward Tenchi with a stern expression, looking him over from above.

"What are you doing here?"

Overwhelmed by the sheer pressure of his presence, Tenchi faltered.

"Um... where were you all this time?"

"I am asking the questions."

Azusa didn't bother to conceal his haughtiness.

"What business have you here while I was away? Go home! You don't belong here."

"I was dragged here by Ayeka!"

Tenchi snapped back furiously.

"I was worried about you. You're the Emperor of Jurai—where were you, and what were you doing?"

"All I hear are excuses."

The Emperor's eyes narrowed slightly.

"A young man with nothing but excuses has no place in our royal family! Go and learn some manners!"

Before Tenchi could react, Azusa stepped into the transfer block and disappeared.

"Damn it..."

Tenchi finally understood he had been utterly and thoroughly insulted.

"Fine, I'll go home without being told! I'm never coming back to a place like this!!"

Tenchi fumed, climbed aboard the Juraian ship, and ordered it to depart.

The fact that the Juraian blood in his veins was what moved the ship didn't cross his mind at all.

"Lord Tenchi..."

Fresh tears were already brimming again despite having just wiped them.

Why won't you understand?

Why won't you say it?

Just one word is all it takes.

Marry me.

Three seconds to say out loud.

Lord Tenchi doesn't say anything, so I did something this bold...

Lord Tenchi would respond—surely he would, he held me so warmly... I couldn't wait any longer, I believed he would answer my feelings!

And he calls it an ambush!!

Wandering in the overwhelming greenery, Ayeka chewed over her misery again and again.

"Ah..."

The gazebo of their night together appeared, and Ayeka stopped involuntarily.

Someone's there.

Could it be Lord Tenchi!?

Ayeka nearly turned and fled, but just managed to hold herself.

No—I mustn't run. Running won't solve anything.

Maybe I was too hasty. If so, I must apologize and calm Lord Tenchi's feelings.

"Oh? What's wrong, looking so troubled like that?"

Who stepped out but the young man with the cool blue hair.

"Tenryou... sama?"

Being looked at by the mature-looking young man who claimed to be the mausoleum keeper's son, Ayeka felt her cheeks warm.

"N-no, nothing at all."

"I watched the press conference. Congratulations on your engagement."

Tenryou said nothing more and smiled.

"Lord Tenchi is somewhat like Prince Yosho, isn't he. You've chosen well."

"Thank you."

Her chest suddenly tightened, and Ayeka hurriedly looked away.

No. I mustn't cry in front of this person.

"My Lady?"

Ayeka pressed her sleeve to her eyes and bit down hard on her lip.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry... my heart won't listen. This has never happened before..."

She could feel herself, the dam she'd constructed, crumbling effortlessly.

"Father... I must be more composed. I am supposed to carry out my responsibilities as a princess—so why..."

Tenryou watched Ayeka sob like a child, looking uncertain, then gently placed a hand on her shoulder and guided her to sit down in the gazebo.

He returned almost immediately with a semi-transparent blue cup filled with spring water.

"Here. This should calm your feelings a little."

Ayeka accepted the cup in silence and drank the clear water.

"I apologize."

The hot, tight knot in her throat seemed to loosen slightly.

"This cup is a keepsake of my father," Tenryou said, cradling the cup and beginning to speak.

"I had never intended to return. Devoting one's life to tending a mausoleum—how absurd, I thought. But when I held this cup my father had left me, I changed my mind."

Tenryou held the cup up to the light.

"This cup was made from the jewel of the first Emperor of Jurai. My father's dying words to me were: Tenryou, I entrust you with the history of the royal family. The story continues. It was my work to protect it."

Ayeka felt a strange sensation.

"The story?"

"This cup holds the history of Jurai. And you, my Lady, are the same as this cup. What would you do if told—from tomorrow, you are the one who must protect this?"

Tenryou smiled quietly.

"You must not be hasty. Preparing yourself to carry a great burden takes time. What you carry is immeasurably heavy."

"You mean Lord Tenchi."

Ayeka looked away, embarrassed.

"How did you know? That I was... troubled about him."

Tenryou's smile didn't waver.

"I've said too much. My Lady—you are the hope of Jurai. Dry your tears, and take hold of your happiness."

"Tenryou-sama..."

Ayeka looked up and finally smiled back.

"Thank you. As I listened to you speak, my foolish heart became still. I must... go and apologize."

Ayeka bowed with a shy smile and quietly left the gazebo.

Tenryou said nothing, watching until Ayeka's figure disappeared from sight.

"Princess Ayeka, I sincerely apologize!"

Almost immediately after being left alone, two guardians appeared.

"Lord Tenchi... we erected a barrier and did our utmost to stop him, but..."

"What happened!?"

She felt the blood drain from her face at the ill omen.

"Lord Tenchi has left Jurai."

"One more thing we must report..."

"You useless fools!"

Ayeka was seized by fierce anger and cut off the rest with a shout at the guardians.

"Hurry, go after him! No—I will go myself. Prepare the ship at once!"

Pale-faced, Ayeka dashed to the transfer block.

She arrived at the royal family exclusive port immediately.

As she started to run forward, Ayeka nearly collapsed.

"Father's ship!?"

"And where do you think you're going?"

A deep baritone resonated from behind her—and both shoulders were firmly seized.

"Father!?"

"Ayeka—I am truly sorry for causing you and Sasami such worry. Now, let's go downstairs and have some tea."

Azusa embraced Ayeka with all the tenderness of a man who couldn't help himself.

"Lord Tenchi! Lord Tenchi must have just been here. When did you return, Father? Where on earth were you!?"

Ayeka finally slipped free of Azusa's arms and turned to interrogate the two guardians who had appeared belatedly.

"Azaka, Kamidake! Where is Lord Tenchi?"

"That young man is no longer here."

Azusa cut in with a stern voice, cupping Ayeka's cheeks in both hands.

"Even with your father returned, all you can talk about is that young man."

"Let me go, Father."

Ayeka felt irritation rising, and regretted the argument with Tenchi.

"I must go! Did you speak to him, Father? Did you say something? I came here to apologize to Lord Tenchi. If I leave now I'll still catch up!"

"I just told you—he is no longer here. When did you start talking back to your father like this, Ayeka? You've become an unruly girl."

Azusa's eyes flashed with anger.

"In any case, come with me! You are a princess of the Jurai royal family. You will not leave this planet one step without my permission!"

Azusa seized Ayeka's arm and started forcefully toward the transfer block.

"Let me go! Even for a father, this is too tyrannical!"

"I'll let you go if you agree to return quietly to your room."

Azusa wasn't listening.

"If you want to hear what that young man said, you'll follow what I say."

"So you did say something to him!?"

Ayeka looked back at the guardians in agitation.

Azaka and Kamidake showed absolutely no inclination to defy the Emperor and protect Ayeka.

"Wow... I'm really riding a spaceship," Satoshi Hoshiura said, standing on the bridge of the Ryu-Ohki, wide-eyed as he stared at the vast ocean of stars spread in every direction.

"Is space really that strange to you?" Ryoko asked with a grin, moving up beside him and pointing in the direction they were traveling.

"Look—the edge of the solar system. Miho-Kiyo usually patrol about this far."

"What?! So that planet I saw a moment ago was Pluto?"

"More like the neighborhood, you might say."

Ryoko was in a good mood and slapped Satoshi on the shoulder, looking around the familiar view.

"Satoshi, where would you like to go? Name any place. Me and Ryo-Ohki can go anywhere in the universe. Want to try the most famous resort planet in the cosmos? Or how about a bar I used to go to when I was a pirate?"

"There are bars in space?"

Satoshi murmured, unable to take his eyes off the darkness of space.

"Of course. There are all kinds of planets, all kinds of species. Of course there are bars and treasures and game arcades."

"Game arcades!?"

"And convenience stores, for that matter. Nothing like the scale of yours, but near the main shipping lanes there are Convenience Station locations where all kinds of people hang around killing time."

"Whoa..."

Satoshi shook his head, overwhelmed, and sat down on the bridge floor.

"My life is so small. Ryoko-san, you're honestly too amazing. Someone this incredible working part-time at a rural convenience store—that's like a fantasy."

"I don't really follow what you're saying."

Ryoko burst out laughing.

"Well, I'm glad you're pleased."

"Ryoko-san!" Satoshi jumped up and grabbed Ryoko's hand firmly.

"I... I don't know what to say, but I'm so glad I met you. From the first time I saw you I thought you were incredible, but the real you is so much more. I can't even touch the hem of your coat."

"What are you getting all worked up about on your own?"

Ryoko didn't look displeased as she grinned.

"You're not going to talk me into free labor just by flattering me."

"That's not it!"

Satoshi glanced away with a bashful look.

"Go out with me. I'm just a regular person with nothing special to offer, but I'll do anything for you. Well, except hang myself if you tell me to."

"You're a strange guy."

Instead of pulling her hand away, Ryoko teleported to appear a little further off.

"Want to be my space pirate partner? Then you could see space every day."

"Space pirate?"

Satoshi turned serious and swallowed hard.

"I'm no good at fighting or anything."

"Useless guy."

Ryoko's eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Can you leave your parents and your hometown behind? Teaming up with me means that kind of thing."

"Fine... I'll be an ungrateful child with no roots."

Satoshi answered with a pained face.

"I said I'd do anything, and I meant it. That's not a lie."

"You..."

For a moment, a lonely shadow crossed Ryoko's eyes.

Tenchi, you idiot... show a little backbone like this, would you.

I'm impatient by nature.

If you keep dithering, I'll hand you over to Ayeka...!

"Just kidding."

Ryoko smiled lightly.

"Your old man would sweep you out with a broom. Right, let's cruise a bit more. Ryo-Ohki!"

"Myaaaah!" came the reply, and Satoshi went wide-eyed again.

"We're going to Ramedo's Bar. Direct jump to the far end of the galaxy!"

Another "myaaah" answered—and the stars began to stream, and Satoshi's consciousness whited out.

"Tenchi-saaan?"

Ding dong, the front doorbell rang.

"That's strange... Tenchi, it's me-e. Let me in please."

"I'm not sure who 'me' is."

The one pressing the bell repeatedly at the Masaki front door was Miho-Kiyo in their Galaxy Police uniforms.

"Oh! Coming."

Nobuyuki ran out and dashed to the front door.

"Oh—Mihoshi, Kiyone!"

"Uncle Nobuyuki, sorry to disturb you—were you napping?"

"No, no, just a little. Come in, come in."

Nobuyuki waved Kiyone in and retreated toward the kitchen.

"Tenchi? He's with Ayeka."

He turned around while making coffee.

"Azaka and Kamidake came as an escort and took him away on a ship. When Grandpa told me, even I was taken aback."

Nobuyuki rubbed under his tired eyes.

"Ayeka's really bold, isn't she. What is Ryoko going to say when she gets back?"

"What? That's cheating, isn't it?"

Mihoshi's eyes went wide, and she got elbowed by Kiyone.

"Is Tenchi all right? We were also worried, we should have come sooner—"

"Well, more or less," Nobuyuki sighed.

"What's going on in his head, I don't know. Grandpa seems fine about it all, and Tenchi hasn't contacted me at all."

"Should I try to reach them?" Kiyone offered with a sympathetic furrow.

"Washu's lab is open, right?"

"No, it's fine." Nobuyuki waved a hand irritably.

"I'll let him sweat until he comes running to me for help. I'm not getting involved."

"Did something happen, Uncle?"

"I have no interest in shipping my son off to be a Juraian prince. I never intended to let Tenchi go somewhere that far away."

Nobuyuki spat it out, then got up to fetch coffee.

"Mihoshi, Kiyone—you worried enough to come all this way, and now I've unloaded all this on you. Sorry."

"No, not at all..."

Miho-Kiyo exchanged looks.

I wonder what happened to Tenchi.

What about Ryoko?

They both swallowed the question that was on the tip of their tongues.

"Uncle Nobuyuki, if there's anything we can do, please don't hesitate to ask."

Kiyone showed her consideration and nodded at Mihoshi.

"Come on, let's go. If it comes out that we skipped patrol to come here, there'll be hell to pay."

"Uncle Nobuyuki, cheer up!"

Just as Mihoshi was rising to leave:

"Tenchi-niichan, I'm hoooome!!"

A lively voice came from the front door, and a breathless Sasami came running in.

"Sasami!?"

"Oh! Miho-Kiyo-neechan!"

Sasami shot past the two like a tiny whirlwind, peeked into the living room, peeked into the tatami room.

"Where's Tenchi-niichan? Isn't he back yet?"

"H-hey, what happened to Tenchi!?"

Kiyone just barely caught Sasami before she could dash off again.

"Well you see—Father came back! And Tenchi-niichan and Sis were supposed to get married, but they had a fight and Tenchi-niichan left. He should be coming back on a Juraian ship."

"What!?"

"The emperor of Jurai!?"

"Tenchi!?"

"And how did Sasami get back? Is Ayeka coming here too?"

"I asked Tsunami to teleport me. Sis and Father are having a big fight."

Sasami lifted her chin firmly.

"Sasami is not going anywhere anymore. She's going to become a child of Earth, and when she grows up, she'll marry Tenchi-niichan!"

"WHAT!?"

Miho-Kiyo and Nobuyuki stared at each other, utterly dumbfounded.

Chapter Six:
"Damn it..."

"Damn it..."

Tenchi stood on the bridge of the Juraian ship, staring at the universe before him.

The Juraian ship silently obeyed Tenchi's will, crossing the sea of stars.

If he just stayed aboard, it would take him straight home to his house in Okayama.

When he got bored of staring into space, he could sleep.

When he got home, he'd explain things to Dad, maybe go hang out at Amagamitsu... then what?

What then?

From there on it went suddenly blank and nothing came to mind.

Right—there's nobody waiting when I get home.

Dad has work, Grandpa has the shrine, and I'm the only one with nothing to do.

Wait—so there's no real reason to rush back.

Tenchi was somewhat stunned by the unexpected conclusion and stared at the bridge floor.

"Am I serious?"

He tried asking the question out loud.

Still not a single image came to mind.

A vague sense of the next moment being blank, a feeling of not really caring anymore.

Was I always this easygoing?

Well... maybe that's always been the case.

It wasn't like I was the type who really wanted to do anything.

Marrying Ayeka and taking over the Juraian royal family... it's exhausting just thinking about it.

Playing around with Ryoko would've been more carefree, I guess... though it's too late to say that now.

"Ryoko... she probably hates me by now."

Tenchi was appalled at his own convenience, but once he accepted it, there was a strangely comfortable feeling.

"I... am I just seeing comfortable dreams?"

"Is that your answer?"

A tinkling bell-like voice came from somewhere, and something white flickered past the edge of his vision.

"Who's there!?"

For a moment, fear shot up his spine and he couldn't move.

"You know, even if you pretend not to. We met once under the cherry blossoms, and once more in a dream."

Softly glowing white bare feet stepped across the bridge floor, and the figure of a girl gradually appeared.

"That's right—just as I thought. Even alone, you can't decide anything. Not even your own heart."

The girl in a pale pink hakama and miko robes smiled and spoke bluntly.

"Who... are you?"

"I told you—I dwell in the space between the real and the illusory. Between heaven and earth, night and dawn, the waking world and the realm of the dead, life coming into being and life fading away... I shift through all those in-betweens. And you are already in my realm."

The girl walked toward him one step, then another, still wearing her soft smile.

"My... realm?"

"Nowhere, nobody, formless, unchanging—the eternal realm. Everything can be as you wish. If you want to go back to Earth, you may—or if you don't, you may stay. Want to see eternity?"

The girl's white hand touched Tenchi's cheek.

The tongue that had been about to say "of course" froze, and the words evaporated.

"You need no courage. Just as you are, with no need to change. Simply by thinking that, you become free. Free from anything, from any involvement. Yes—shall I show you the future? You can do anything, if you wish it."

The future? My future?

The words that had frozen his heart suddenly moved.

What is my future—what am I doing?

What kind of adult will I become, what kind of life will I live?

Who will be... at my side?

As if reading his feelings, the girl took Tenchi's hand and looked into his eyes.

A sudden strong pull—and Tenchi nearly stopped breathing.

The bridge, space, the faint glow of the instruments—everything vanished in an instant, and Tenchi stood between a hazy sky and a pure white earth.

Cherry petals drifted down, again and again.

Petals swirled up, scattered, and spiraled around Tenchi.

"That time..."

The cherry blossoms of the dream—or were they an illusion?

"Come, let us go."

The girl's eyes darkened.

Where to—before he could ask, the scene changed.

A small, old shrine's grounds, and the figure of an elderly priest drawing together fallen leaves appeared and drew close.

The old man stopped his work and straightened his back, gazing as if in thought at the shrine's forest.

"Grandpa!?"

Again the scene changed.

In the living room of the familiar house, a man sat reading a newspaper.

Beside him, curled up contentedly, was a calico cat.

"Dad!"

Tenchi cried out without thinking.

He was alone!?

Where had everyone gone?

And then Nobuyuki looked up.

"Five years already..."

With the newspaper still spread on his knees, Nobuyuki stared into space with tired eyes.

"It couldn't be helped. It couldn't be helped... could it, Mom?"

A cold tremor ran up Tenchi's spine.

What happened?

Where am I?!

The scene swept away and a small gazebo appeared before Tenchi's eyes.

The very gazebo where he and Ayeka had spent the night—two shadows side by side in it now.

"Princess Ayeka, what is the matter?"

An unfamiliar male voice.

"Nothing. I was remembering... something from long ago."

The Ayeka who looked up made Tenchi catch his breath.

In a pure white kimono with her hair pinned up and her forehead bare, Ayeka looked uncannily like a stranger—her face that of a mature woman.

"Yes... things from long ago."

The Juraian man with blue hair nodded in silence, then gently drew Ayeka closer and held her.

"It's all right to cry when you want to."

"Even if I wear mourning clothes forever? Even so, is it all right?"

"A bride in mourning is fine. If I can be at your side, protecting you."

"Tenryou-sama..."

Ayeka looked away, gently removing the man's hand.

"Give me time... no, just stay beside me as you are."

The sound faded and the scene shifted, and Tenchi found himself standing in the forest of his homeland.

The entrance to the small shrine surrounded by boulders was firmly shut, looking unchanged.

"What happened to me? Is this really the future?"

Tenchi spun to face the girl, demanding an answer.

The girl kept her smile and said nothing, then abruptly looked up.

"Hm?"

Following her gaze upward, he saw blue hair.

"Ryoko!!"

Tenchi ran, without thinking climbed the rocks, reached out to touch her shoulder.

His hand passed right through Ryoko's shoulder, leaving not even a sensation.

Ryoko stood without moving on the rock, with a hard, stern expression, looking down at the glittering water below.

"That damn fool... vanishing without a word..."

"Vanished!?"

Tenchi ran around to face Ryoko.

"I'm right here! Ryoko, can't you hear me? Can't you see me?"

Again the scene changed as if a screen had been switched.

A building with a wing-spread design stood on a vast property.

The color of the surrounding plants and soil showed this was not Earth.

"Come on now, the next class is starting."

"I know."

Among slender trees, two figures appeared—a small person in a white coat and a girl of almost the same height.

"Mama, tell me more. Where was I born? Why don't I have a Papa?"

"I told you."

The woman in the white coat pushed back red hair.

"Once upon a time, in a certain place, there was a small planet. That planet was called Earth, and it was a very beautiful place. In a small country on that small planet, there lived a princess and a space pirate and a first-class detective and an old man and a father and a young prince. Your Papa was the prince. One day the prince went to visit the princess who had gone home to her planet—and on his way back he was in an accident. The prince never came home. The small country fell apart, and then Mama came to this research lab bringing you, just newly born."

"I remember Papa!"

The girl stepped forward with defiance.

"Someone's thin, soft hands were holding me. The cicadas were singing and when the wind rustled the leaves, dappled light flickered through, and when I opened my eyes Papa was looking down at me. 'Mayuka-chan'... smiling, a kind face... If what Mama says is true, how come I remember?"

"Mayuka!?"

Tenchi cried out involuntarily.

"Washu, what is going on? What happened to me? Did I die? What was the accident?!"

"It was a dream. All of it, a dream..."

Washu drew Mayuka close.

"Once upon a time, there was a small blue planet... you just think you remember something that never happened."

"That's a lie!!"

Tenchi turned desperately.

"This can't be the future. How can this be real? Why am I nowhere in it? Why has everyone disappeared?!"

"A lie? What is true and what is false?"

The girl turned impossibly beautiful eyes on him.

"You no longer exist in this world. The space between the real and the dream is only one step. Did you think you were immortal? Did you think someone would always protect you?"

The girl's eyes darkened softly, and Tenchi felt his soul being drawn into some bottomless abyss.

"I was waiting for you. Waiting for you to wander in uncertainty before the door to the future."

"Enough!"

Tenchi cut her off.

"Send me back. I was on my way home. This is not my future. I refuse to accept it!"

"Is that so?"

In the moment he realized it, both Washu and Mayuka and the girl's form were gone, and Tenchi was left in a pure white space.

"Wasn't this what you saw? A pure white future with nothing in it. I only gave you the tiniest push. I only gave your future a shape. This is the future just as you imagined it."

A tinkling laugh—and then even that was gone.

"You!?"

Tenchi tried to call the girl's name and froze.

He remembered that the girl had no name.

No words could reach her.

There were no words to call out to something with no name.

"Where did you go? You tricked me!!"

There was no answer.

Cold terror crept up his spine.

"Tsunami! Mom! Someone help me. Please..."

The Juraian blood pulsed hot through his veins, but no matter how he called, there was no sign of a miracle occurring.

Illusory cherry blossoms scattered over Tenchi as if mocking him, and disappeared like thin snow on the white earth.

I can never go home.

I can never see anyone again.

Never again.

In the hazy white world, Tenchi sank to his knees, covered his face, and sobbed.

"You impossibly stubborn man!"

The moment she stepped out of the transfer block, Ayeka shook off Azusa's hand.

On the terrace overlooking the courtyard, Ladies Funaho and Misaki stood together silently watching husband and daughter quarrel. But Ayeka had lost any desire to seek help from either of them.

"You just don't like that Sasami and I are on Earth. You can't stand that we're not doing as you say. That's it, isn't it?"

"Have you no awareness of your place as a princess? Sit down!"

Azusa's cheeks flushed with anger as he pointed to a terrace chair.

"I hear you took it upon yourself to hold a press conference. You intend to bring that young man into the Juraian royal family? You entrusted your fate to him? I will not allow such presumption without my permission!"

"Why not?"

Ayeka gripped the chair back so tightly her knuckles went white, and answered back.

"I have no intention of marrying anyone but Lord Tenchi. I would rather die than submit to your will!"

"I told you to sit down! Conduct yourself like a princess!"

"No, I will not be silent."

Ayeka stared back at Azusa without looking away, though she had gone pale.

"What don't you like about Lord Tenchi? Lord Tenchi's kindness is not the same as being unreliable. What do you know? I have lived beside Lord Tenchi. He is a wonderful person. Unlike your Majesty—stubborn, tyrannical!"

"A young man who can only make excuses cannot govern a royal family!"

Azusa flared up and inadvertently revealed his trump card.

"That young man told me himself—he was only dragged here against his will by you. A young man with that kind of disposition is unwanted here, I sent him away. He cannot make up his mind between you and Ryoko—I won't give my precious daughter to a spineless man like that!"

"How could you..."

Azusa looked down at his daughter's face, which had gone ashen.

Well, she'll forget it soon enough.

She's just feverish right now.

With a little time and distance, the flaws will show themselves.

Yes—time and space, that's all it takes.

Azusa shifted to a gentle tone, calculating the effect.

"There are other fine men. There's a good young man at the Galaxy Academy too—the chancellor's son, with rare intelligence and determination. His family background matches the royal family. His looks aren't bad either. A fine man. Isn't that the kind of man more suitable for you?"

"...I understand."

Ayeka's hollow voice came out, and she raised a hand to her forehead.

The tiara with the royal jewel set in it—never removed since the ceremony of the bond—made a hard sound as it landed on the table.

"I return this to you. I am no longer a member of the royal family. As one woman, I will go to Lord Tenchi's side."

"What!?"

Azusa couldn't believe his ears.

"I forbid it! You are a princess!"

"I am no longer an royal woman."

For the first time, Ayeka turned toward her two mothers.

"Lady Misaki, Lady Funaho, please forgive me."

It seemed like Lady Misaki's—and then Lady Funaho's—eyes smiled.

Go quickly, they seemed to say. Go and seize your happiness.

"Then, Ayeka will take her leave."

"You shall not!!"

Just as he started to go after his daughter who had flung herself into the transfer block, a gentle force stopped Azusa's arm.

"My dear."

It was Lady Funaho's hand.

"Earth is my birthplace, you know. Have you forgotten? That long ago, you carried me—still just a girl—away to this distant star."

"Azusa, how foolish." Lady Misaki caught his other arm.

"Do you want to be hated for the rest of their lives by your two daughters? If you're going to be stubborn any further, I won't sleep with you anymore."

"Um... hmm."

Azusa looked from one wife to the other, and when he was truly cornered, finally noticed something far more important.

"Where is Sasami? Bring Sasami here!"

"She left long ago. While you were shouting."

Lady Misaki and Lady Funaho looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"I wonder what's happened to Tenchi-niichan. He should have come back by now on a Jurai ship."

Sasami paced restlessly around the room, picking up the kitten.

"Misoka-chan, where's Ryo-chan? Isn't Ryoko-neechan back either?"

"Piii~"

The kitten was thrilled to see Sasami and licked her nose over and over, purring loudly.

"There, there, I'm so sorry I left you. I won't go anywhere else anymore."

"You made it back, Sasami. Are you all right?"

Nobuyuki narrowed his eyes, looking at the small girl.

"Yep. Home is definitely best. Has everyone eaten? Want me to make something?"

Nobuyuki and Miho-Kiyo looked at each other and laughed.

"Your very first concern is about food—only Sasami. Actually I haven't eaten anything since this morning."

"Me neither~"

"I'm also...still haven't had lunch."

"Geez. With Sasami gone just a little while, nobody can do anything. Is spaghetti okay? Something simple?"

Sasami smiled and disappeared into the kitchen.

Before long the familiar sounds came from the kitchen, and the Masaki living room once again became warm and comfortable.

"Yes, yes. This is it. This is the one."

"Oh, Mihoshi—you're really such a glutton."

Kiyone looked at Mihoshi already completely at ease, and smiled with relief.

"Nope—all of them coming back and everything going back to the way it was. That's all I want."

"Yeah."

Kiyone swallowed the words she'd nearly said.

It's all right. Who cares about patroling.

There's actually the second princess of the Jurai imperial family right here—security comes first, report later.

Then in the garden there was a thundering sound, and the kitten's ears perked up as it shot off.

"Piii~, piii~, piii~!"

"What? What is it?"

Sasami came running out of the kitchen in surprise.

"Hey~"

Ryoko slipped through the sliding door and walked right into the living room.

"Oh, Sasami! Ran away from home?"

"Ryoko-neechan, welcome back!"

Sasami clung to Ryoko with the cooking chopsticks still in her hand.

"Where were you? Tenchi-niichan suddenly disappeared, that must have been a surprise."

"Hm?"

Ryoko's eyes went wide.

"Tenchi went somewhere?"

"What? You didn't know? Tenchi-niichan was on Jurai. Sis sent Azaka and Kamidake to pick him up and brought him over by force. So was Ryoko-neechan away from home the whole time?"

"I never heard any of this."

Miho-Kiyo exchanged looks instinctively.

Because it was plain as day what Ryoko was thinking.

"Hmm... so Ayeka did that. Of all people to talk about jumping the queue."

In reality neither had ever said anything of the sort to each other—but one look at Ryoko's face made it absolutely clear what she was angry about.

"Right, then there's no point in me being here. See ya, Sasami. Everyone stay well."

"What? Ryoko-neechan, aren't you going to see Tenchi-niichan?"

Just as Ryoko was about to teleport, Sasami's unexpected words made her turn back as if she'd been ambushed.

"What did you say?"

"He'll be back soon. Because Tenchi-niichan and Sis had a fight. So Ryoko-neechan doesn't need to worry. Sasami doesn't mind either. It was Sis's fault!"

"They had a fight?"

Ryoko came back, thoroughly intrigued.

The anger from a moment ago seemed left somewhere behind.

"Hey, why did they fight? Tell me more."

"You promise you won't go anywhere?"

"Yeah."

The deal was struck, and Sasami and Ryoko moved to the kitchen and began recounting the whole turbulent series of events.

"Where is Lord Tenchi's ship? Azaka, Kamidake—find him and catch up at once!"

"As you command!"

Ayeka stood on the bridge of Lady Misaki's ship, glaring at the navigation monitor and issuing orders.

Lady Misaki's ship—of the highest rank in the imperial family—was a gift from a mother who had cheered on her daughter's rebellion.

Thank goodness Lady Misaki lent me this ship... Ayeka thanked Lady Misaki in her heart.

To climb aboard an imperial ship alone and operate it without knowing how—Lord Tenchi is bold indeed.

But right now he might be feeling frightened and lonely.

I must catch up quickly and apologize, and reassure him.

"Still not found?"

Ayeka felt so impatient she wanted to run.

"We've caught an energy interference wave at the jump point. Lord Tenchi is believed to have already headed toward Earth."

"Determine the exact trajectory at once. Once it's confirmed, we jump too."

"As you command."

As she listened to her loyal guardians reporting, Ayeka felt a small measure of relief.

Lord Tenchi's ship, though of low rank, was reading Lord Tenchi's will and steadily following the route to Earth.

Lady Misaki's ship could catch up in a fraction of the time.

"Lord Tenchi, I'm coming now."

Ayeka stood straight and stared out at the sea of stars.

The anomaly occurred immediately after.

"My Lady, we've lost the ship's trail!"

"There's no evidence of warp-out at the Earth destination point. Lord Tenchi's ship is estimated to still be in subspace."

"What!? Azaka, Kamidake—immediately run an omnidirectional search including subspace throughout all airspace. The warp-out points are limited. Find him no matter what!"

"As you command!"

For a while, an agonizing interval passed.

As she watched Lady Misaki's ship and the guardians exchanging data directly, Ayeka battled draining anxiety.

For a Juraian ship to go missing against the pilot's will...

What on Earth has happened to Lord Tenchi!?

Could he have been caught in a singularity in subspace!?

Or some kind of accident that a low-ranked ship couldn't handle?

"Lady Misaki, Tsunami, help... please find Lord Tenchi!"

Ayeka didn't just fold her hands while leaving it to Lady Misaki's ship and the guardians.

"Azaka! Send a simultaneous communication to Washu, Earth's Ryoko, and Kiyone. This is an emergency!"

"Understood."

Ayeka's SOS was immediately received in the Galaxy Academy research lab, by Ryo-Ohki's core, and by the Galaxy Police shuttle.

"What? Lord Tenchi is missing?"

The first to respond was an ansible call from Washu, who happened to be in the lab.

"What happened? Tell me simply."

"Lord Tenchi..."

Washu on screen furrowed her brow listening to Ayeka's account of events, but cut Ayeka off before the end.

"Okay, there's nothing I can do from here. I'm going back through the subspace passage to my lab right now—Ayeka, keep searching a little longer."

"Understood. If any leads are found, I'll contact you immediately."

The ansible cut off.

"Myah! Myah myah myah myah, myaaan!"

Mihoshi's bracelet started chiming at the same time that Ryo-Ohki—back to her rabbit-cat form—came flying into the Masaki living room while they were all in the middle of eating spaghetti.

"What? Tenchi's ship is...!?"

Ryoko's face changed color at the report, and Kiyone put down her fork and rose.

When Mihoshi stopped the call on her bracelet, Yukinojo's voice broke in.

"Urgent communication from Princess Ayeka—there is a strong possibility that Lord Tenchi has been in an accident!"

"No way...!?"

"What happened to Tenchi!?"

Nobuyuki stood up, spaghetti plate still in hand, and Mihoshi nearly dropped spaghetti all over the carpet.

"We have to get in touch with Ayeka."

"There's an ansible in Washu's lab!"

Kiyone was already running.

Communication reached Lady Misaki's ship's bridge immediately after.

"Ayeka, you—!!"

"Ayeka!"

"Sis!?"

On the screen Ryoko and Nobuyuki and Miho-Kiyo and Sasami all started talking at once and Ayeka couldn't make out a word.

"Everyone! One at a time, please!"

"Tenchi-niichan, what happened!?"

Sasami's voice became the representative question everyone most wanted answered.

"The truth is..."

While Ayeka recounted the circumstances, the five on screen managed to hold back their comments.

"Isn't Lady Misaki's ship enough? What about His Majesty's ship?"

"Where is this? Send me coordinates now. I'm going in Ryo-Ohki."

"Wait."

Ryoko, about to teleport, was stopped by Ayeka's voice.

"Washu is heading that way. Please contact me again when she arrives."

The connection cut, and the people of the Masaki household were left in front of the lab screen.

"Same as always..."

Tenchi trudged across the ground heaped with the husks of cherry blossoms.

From above, a steady rain of new petals fell—but the moment they touched the ground and seemed about to settle, they vanished like a dream.

So the depth and feel underfoot were always the same.

Is this the world of a dream I once saw?

Feeling as if he were going endlessly in circles, Tenchi suddenly stopped.

No. This is neither the world of dreams nor another world.

The girl's words came back to him freshly, and Tenchi's head snapped up.

Your eyes see what your heart shows you. If you are this afraid, you can no longer see anything true...

Yes—the girl had said that.

If those words were true, then I'm in a world that my own heart is showing me.

It's my heart that's going in circles.

If I think there's no exit, it becomes so. If I think I can never go back, it truly becomes that.

Because it's my own heart thinking that.

So—if I think I want to go home, can I go home?

If I think it's an illusion, can I return to the real world?

Tenchi closed his eyes, and for a single moment imagined strongly, strongly.

The Juraian ship, himself standing on its bridge—the image of himself before the girl appeared.

For an instant, the illusion thinned slightly and the ship's bridge seemed to show through.

But when he opened his eyes, the scene had returned to what it was.

"Still no good..."

Of course that easy trick wouldn't work... the other self inside him sneered.

Then am I giving up?

Am I going to stay here forever?

An unexpectedly powerful surge of energy rose from the depths of his heart.

I'm the only one here.

If I give up, it's all over.

It's natural that no one is helping me.

Because this is inside my own heart.

Tenchi looked up again.

Maybe a stronger image is needed.

What I truly desire, what I wish for more than anything else...

For example, the green of Earth, the landscape of Okayama where I grew up, stone steps from the house leading up to Grandpa's shrine, carrot leaves swaying over an entire field, and a house filled with loud chatter and arguments and laughter, warming me as I come back from the fields...

That everyday familiar scene.

Yes. That's it.

Like peeling away a thin veil, Tenchi's image grew steadily clearer and stronger.

Ayeka is on the sofa in the living room, Sasami is doing her homework.

Ryoko is watching from the beam overhead, Washu is absorbed in some research in the lab.

In the evening George stands at the kitchen, and we all gather around the dinner table.

Dad, Grandpa, Mihoshi and Kiyone who came to save on dinner costs, Ayeka, Sasami, Ryoko, Washu.

Ryo-Ohki and Misoka too, of course.

When next year comes, Mayuka will join them.

She's not in human form yet, but when she's born she'll surely be a cute little girl.

That's right!

A glimpse of the future flashed through Tenchi's mind.

Mayuka, I won't let you ever say "why don't I have a papa?"

You're going to start a new life, surrounded by me and Dad and Grandpa and a host of mothers, happy and full.

So I have to go home.

Ryoko and Ayeka have to be there too.

That's the future—the future I wanted most.

Change, future. I'll open the door to the future myself!

The instant Tenchi wished it, space burst open like an explosion, and the stars began to flow in the darkness as rivers of light.

"Warp-out to Earth complete, one more skip and we'll arrive at your Majesty's destination."

The Juraian ship's gentle voice was heard.

"I made it back..."

Tenchi stared at the approaching blue planet and offered a prayer from the depths of his heart, not knowing what to thank.

Thank you, everyone... I could come back because you were all there.

"Lord Tenchi's ship has been found!"

"Energy reaction at the warp-out point, heading toward Earth!"

"He was found!?"

Ayeka rushed toward the small gleaming point on the screen.

"Follow immediately. Not one second late—or I'll never forgive you!"

"As you command!!"

The ship carrying Ayeka and the guardians instantly turned about and broke out of subspace.

In the Masaki living room, the people gathered around the screen in Washu's lab with Washu and George back at the center, all jumped when they heard a sound at the front sliding door.

"Is someone there? Yosho-niisama?"

"Sasami, is that you?"

"Tenchi-niichan!?"

Sasami's eyes went wide, and then she came running as if she'd collide with him.

"Tenchi! Where were you!?" Ryoko grabbed Tenchi's neck from the side, and Miho-Kiyo and Nobuyuki gaped with their mouths open at the main character who was supposed to have gone missing.

"Dad, sorry to worry you. Um... why is everyone here?"

"Because your girlfriend sent an SOS that echoed through the galaxy," Washu said, and burst out laughing at Tenchi's astonished face.

"Honestly, what a troublesome pair you two are. Thanks to all this, Washu-chan is now unemployed."

"What?"

Tenchi couldn't follow what she was saying, just stared at the grinning genius scientist who never lost her cool at any moment.

"I already put in my resignation. Mayuka's care is entering the second phase."

"Then you're coming home?"

A smile spread across Tenchi's cheeks.

"That means the future is set."

"What future?"

Then the front sliding door opened again with a sound, and with pattering footsteps, the first princess of the Juraian royal family came rushing in.

"Lord Tenchi!!"

In the next moment, the gathered Masaki household witnessed something unbelievable.

"I'm so sorry, Lord Tenchi."

Right before everyone's eyes, Ayeka wrapped her arms around Tenchi and gave him a passionate kiss.

"Wha—"

Even Ryoko was left speechless—and then Ayeka began delivering her love declaration with flushed cheeks.

"I was foolish. Rather than Lord Tenchi leaving this house, I should have been the one to leave the imperial family. Ayeka has just this moment discarded both the name of the royal family and the mark of the bond. From now on, I wish to live as a woman of Earth, at Lord Tenchi's side."

"Oh, really? Thank you, Ayeka."

Tenchi's unexpected reply left everyone wide-eyed again.

"I finally understood. That having everyone here is what makes me happy. So I want everyone to be here, to come back. Ryoko, where are you going?"

Tenchi caught the hand of Ryoko, who had been making a troubled, angry face and about to disappear.

"I have a favor to ask. Will you be a mother together with Ayeka?"

"A mother!?"

Ryoko's cheeks went scarlet in an instant.

"Why together with Ayeka!?"

"Because I'm going to be the father."

Tenchi said it a little bashfully.

"Sasami, Mihoshi, Kiyone, Washu—I want everyone to be mothers. Is that okay?"

"Tenchi-san, you'd be run ragged with that many all at once!"

"Well, I can't help it."

Tenchi laughed.

"Mihoshi—I absolutely don't want to lose anyone. So if I have to marry everyone, there's nothing else for it, right?"

"Are you serious!?"

Ayeka exclaimed with an utterly exasperated expression.

"No way... even Father isn't this bad!"

"Well done, I have to say. Is this my indecisive son?"

Nobuyuki murmured under his breath so no one could hear, but Washu caught every word.

"Lord Tenchi, your father is praising you. Next summer we can have a big birthday celebration."

"Oh! Right—Mayuka is going to be born!"

Sasami jumped up with delight.

"Tenchi-niichan is Papa, right? Sasami's not going to be Mama—I want to be called Onee-sama. Sasami always wanted to be a big sister just once!"

"You guys..."

Ryoko's voice went flat.

"Ayeka, if you pull any more sneaky moves, I'll kill you for real this time."

"I'm perfectly fine with that. You'd better keep your eyes wide open too."

The eternal rivals glared at each other in perfectly synchronized timing.

"I might just end up killed by the Emperor of Jurai at this rate."

Tenchi thought to himself, but didn't say it out loud.

"Looks like we're back to square one."

Tenchi was remembering the vow he'd made the day he first met the girl of the dream.

Whatever happens from here on out, I will protect this happiness!

He had vowed that, clearly.

"Dad, how about we order sushi tonight?"

"That won't do, Tenchi. It's such a waste of money."

George's small kindness saved Nobuyuki's wallet in the nick of time.

"Well, I mean... Tenchi, welcome home."

Nobuyuki looked around at the family restored to its original state with the happiest face of anyone in the room.

"All's well that ends well."

Under the falling cherry blossoms, Katsuhito was slowly strolling along the pond's edge enjoying the evening breeze.

"Long time no see, Yosho."

White bare feet appeared, glowing faintly, and a girl wrapped in a white feather robe emerged.

"Oh, Foken. How many years has it been? Where have you been this time, and what sort of mischief have you made?"

"Hehe... that's a secret."

Katsuhito and Foken—the cherry blossom spirit who had lived in this place longer than even Katsuhito—shared a conversation that only the two of them could understand, and slowly disappeared into the grove.

[End]

Afterword

To everyone who has supported "Tenchi" throughout:

This time I deliver the thirteenth and final volume.

The decision to write the final story of the novel version of Tenchi... actually came about a year and a half before this writing.

This story, which began with six OVA episodes of the first season back in 1992, has continued this far supported and loved by all of you fans.

Two TV series, two films, comics, games, and even the Pretty Sammy series that grew from the Tenchi world—none of this expansion and deepening of the story world could have happened without your passionate support and encouragement.

For the author who has continued writing the Tenchi novels, these six years have been a period of many experiences, and one of constant opportunities to challenge new stories.

Looking back now, it fills me with deep emotion.

Supported by your passionate feelings, walking this far together with the Tenchi world—the day will come when I return it to all of you.

When that day comes, what kind of story should it be... the author has always thought about this.

As a result, the story turned out quite different from what I was thinking a year and a half ago.

Several variations and several stories converged and merged, and the shape became clear to me around the time I wrote "Tennyo" in the "Mubyou Sokusai" arc.

This story, both story-wise and timing-wise, fits perfectly into the blank period just before the Mayuka of "A Midsummer's Eve" is regenerated and born.

What happened among Tenchi's family during the period before Mayuka is reborn as a new member of the Masaki family... that is this story.

So the true ending of this story is the ending that flowed in the film "A Midsummer's Eve"—that very scene.

Tenchi's family watching over a tiny new life born in the early summer sunlight, in dappled light... that gentle, warm future is what I wanted to send as the final story to all of you—that is what the author decided.

By the time Mayuka grows up and enters elementary school, an even more lively and happy big family will surely have been made.

What about Tenchi after that?

And Ryoko?

And Ayeka?

Sasami, Miho-Kiyo, Washu and George, Grandpa and Dad?

Ryo-Ohki and Misoka?

...The answers are in your hearts, I believe.

Just as each of you opens the door to your own future and steps out toward a tomorrow not yet seen, Tenchi's family too will go on making new futures.

If you feel that, I would be glad.

Stories are infinite... the end of one story is the beginning of the next.

Just as Ryoko and Ayeka shed one by one the shackles and constraints that bound their unfree hearts—more freely, more richly, may the world you are living in now shine.

If Tenchi's modest little story was of even the smallest use... that is my one wish.

I got a bit serious there, but yes—one or two things I forgot to mention.

What became of Emperor Jurai Azusa after his spectacular falling-out with his own daughter?

The author's guess: he immediately put his own embarrassment on a high shelf and started making "when is my grandchild coming" calls to the beloved Princess Ayeka.

Even after once "disowning" both daughters, of all things.

Lady Misaki and Lady Funaho will be managing that Emperor of Jurai with appropriate handling and appropriate support, governing the great Jurai imperial family firmly even today.

The home front's future remains secure.

There may well be scenes of Azusa sipping Okayama sake in the shrine office of his son Yosho, secretly grumbling...

Is the Ryo-Ohki sitting on his knees? Or the grown-up Misoka?

I hadn't yet told you that Miho-Kiyo came back as the new face of Convenience Store Three Stars.

After that, Satoshi Hoshiura started dropping by the Masaki house fairly often.

He never breathes a word about the night he spent at the space bar, but he always brings ice cream as a gift.

When will the door to the future in his heart open?

Once I start thinking about these things, there's no end to it.

For now, the story of the novel version of Tenchi closes here.

To everyone who cheered us on, to everyone who sent letters—I'm truly sorry I couldn't write back to each of you.

But I treasure every one of them.

With six years' worth of gratitude to all my readers, and gratitude to everyone in the editorial department who took such good care of me...

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

In a different world, with a new story—let's meet again.

Watch for it! And with that, the author intends to open her own door to the future.

Stroking the cat on my knee,

Naohoko Hasegawa